

*Geoff Hunt*



# PAINTING WATERCOLOUR OUTDOORS

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OUTDOORS



*Overhanging branches, Millbank*

I had been walking the riverside searching for a subject for some time before I finally realised how attractive was the afternoon light coming through the plane tree leaves.

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# PAINTING WATERCOLOUR OUTDOORS

 THE CROWOOD PRESS



*Hammersmith Bridge*

There is a good view of the bridge from this spot, but it's difficult to get to, involving scrambling over a low wall, pushing through some vegetation, then setting up on a bank of river mud when you get there.

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**his book is about painting watercolour outdoors (*en plein air*, as it is properly called). It is about bringing home successful paintings done outdoors working out of a backpack, without any of the time, comforts, facilities, equipment and elbow room available in a studio. Why would anyone want to do this? I can only say that I and many other artists find this an utterly addictive challenge – the sense of reward you feel on wrestling a painting out of the many difficulties outdoors, if successful, is wonderful; as well as observing at first hand the strength of light, the colour, the ideas for composition you find when working directly from the subject outside instead of indoors.



*Rain, the Royal Exchange*

If you really want to draw architectural subjects outdoors, you can't beat watercolour. This was a grey scene, but I could exploit watercolour's natural luminosity to suggest subtle colour in the far distance, while knowing that I had some real punch in reserve when it came to the dark notes in the foreground. The Royal Exchange very kindly gave permission for myself and one or two others to work in the shelter of their portico.

I had painted outdoors in oils for about ten years when, in 2013, I decided to switch to watercolour. There were three reasons for this: I

wanted to explore what I thought must be the greater luminosity and freedom of this medium, I thought that my painting bag would be cleaner and weigh less, and I was inspired by the current generation of watercolour painters. Watercolour used to have something of a poor reputation as a weak, tentative medium – a medium for most serious painters to avoid. But in recent years a whole new school of watercolour painters has sprung up around the world, ambitious, fearlessly tackling big subjects with masses of paint on large pieces of paper, making use of dramatic lighting and sweeping gesture. Many of those new-school paintings are done out of doors, but they often rely heavily on grand architecture or spacious scenes for their subjects, as well as pretty reliable spells of unbroken sunshine. As a painter working mainly in England, I usually find these ingredients in short supply – I was to discover, in a painful process of learning, that England is not Spain, nor yet Australia. Also, I found that watercolour outdoors is a much more difficult medium than oil. It isn't just the contrariness of the medium – what works on one day may not work on another, even using the very same type of paper, what with the difference in temperature and the humidity – but when it comes on to rain, as it often does in this country, you'll get into a terrible mess packing everything up quickly. Meanwhile your oil painting companions keep on painting, quiet smiles on their faces, while small puddles form on their palettes.



*Wisteria, Twickenham Yacht Club*

There is a painter's saying, 'it just fell off the brush', signifying that the picture seemed to practically paint itself without your own intervention. This was one of those. Again, a real subject for watercolour, with its soft and its hard areas, its 'lost and found', its capacity to render things as different as blossom and stonework equally well.

But there's something about watercolour that keeps me coming back. For those who love the medium, what you are witnessing with the best kind of watercolour practically amounts to performance art. And the excitement

for the artist – that do-or-die moment when you commit a big brush full of wash to the paper, no going back – is unbeatable. Somehow you never really know what will emerge when the brush touches the paper. There is an alchemy between yourself and what the flowing water has decided to do that day. I have illustrated this Introduction with just a very few images as tasters of the different kinds of approach that are possible with watercolour, whether you are setting out to do a sketchbook note, a rapid atmospheric vignette or a more complete finished piece. All these approaches are explored much further in this book.

What's more, for any outdoor painter, be it in oil or watercolour, there is always another kind of excitement in setting out for the day's work. The experience is always new. Because you never know, do you? Today might turn out to be a magical day. This might be the day where you stumble upon an inspirational series of subjects to make your own. This might be the day when – finally – your eye and your hand know what to do with the medium without you even having to think. This might be the day when all the elements you have struggled with for so long all seamlessly fuse together and you discover your style, your technique, your own path to the heart of your art. Today you might qualify as a master. You never know. And if you do not feel this tingle, this ever-renewed excitement, no matter that you are disappointed practically every time – well, best stay at home and do a crossword instead. Well-meaning passers-by outdoors often remark how relaxing it must be to paint like this. It may be therapeutic, but it is rarely relaxing. It's not a relaxing pastime. It's on the obsessive-compulsive spectrum. If it's in you, you have to do it.



*Late afternoon from Blackfriars Bridge*

One of the delights of painting outdoors is that, no matter how mundane the view, or how many times you have seen it before, the ever-changing light may transform it into something more special. But with watercolour you will need luck too: here, the first pinkish-yellow and grey-violet washes somehow fell just right for me, and conveyed the late afternoon atmosphere.

Having started painting watercolour outdoors, and discovering what a challenge it was, I wrote four series of articles for *The Artist* magazine in which I recorded my progress, or the lack of it. In the very first of these articles I half-jokingly listed the qualities I thought might be required to go watercolour painting outdoors. These were: a complete understanding and mastery of the medium and its materials; the ability to rapidly summarise what first attracted you to the scene; and a Zen-like state of perfect calm concentration followed by swift decisive action. After the first year's painting, I stood by that list, as I still stand by it, but I added one further essential requirement: inexhaustible optimism. No matter how many times you experience failure – and with watercolour it will be plenty – you have

to be able to rise next day with the cheerful sun in your heart and give it another go.



A sketchbook page. These are often very personal, and this one was particularly so for me, since I came straight to this place from attending a good friend's funeral, and worked on this sketch while my thoughts were settling. Somehow watercolour seems so suitable for these very reflective moments; it is hard to imagine a similar thing working with an oil painting outdoors.

Almost all the paintings in this book were completed on location outdoors. Very, very rarely I make minor changes in the studio the following day, but this is something I hate to do – to change the seen image of the day. The final part of [Chapter 7](#) is an exception, since it deals with completing work in the studio, mostly where finishing outdoors proves difficult or impossible. All the rest of the work, for good or ill, appears just as it was done out there on site. Since much of my outdoor painting activity is done with my friends and colleagues in the Wapping Group of Artists, whose remit is to paint London, including the river Thames and its wide-spreading estuary, a great deal of the work in this book is drawn from that area. There is other work from sketching and painting trips elsewhere, and some even done aboard sailing ships. But putting locations aside, this book is more generally about the practice of painting in watercolour outdoors, not just as a sketching medium for later expansion in the studio, but with the essential aim of producing a work complete in itself, an honest on-the-spot response to one's experience of that subject and that day.

Painting outdoors, despite all its difficulties and setbacks, is an enlarging experience. Try it: it is good for you.

## CHAPTER 1

# PAINTING OUTDOORS

Painting outdoors can be exciting and very rewarding – there is nothing to beat the feeling of bringing home a successful painting at the end of the day. Naturally there are many challenges in doing this without all the conveniences and comforts at hand in a studio, whether equipping yourself with the right kit, finding a subject, managing to paint without a handy work surface or table, or coping with the weather conditions – but this book covers all these challenges, and should provide you with at least a basis for your own ventures into the great outdoors.



*Covent Garden colonnade*

A very busy urban corner, but no one bothered me here, probably because there were so many more interesting things to look at. Just for once I had a clear view where no one proceeded to park a truck or van right across my line of sight.

Let's begin with what you might call the psychological challenge, the one which so many would-be painters find off-putting. This is the worry about being out there in public, on display, the target of curious or critical passers-by. Even some well-seasoned outdoor painters will often try to find

hidden corners, tucked away from the prying gaze, and probably most of us, given the choice, would prefer to get on with our work without being bothered. One of my Wapping Group friends, for example, is notorious for hiding himself away in obscure corners because he hates to be watched while at work, so his subjects are often not the obvious ones. Others like to settle down in the most sheltered and comfortable spot they can find before then painting whatever happens to be visible from that point. But if you are out in the open, people generally are surprisingly courteous and non-confrontational, nor are they critical. They usually pause for quick look as they pass by. More often than not they will have a kind word for you, but no more than that; you rarely have to have long conversations if you don't want to. Having a sort of business card handy to give out, especially if it shows one or two of your pictures and maybe provides a website to look at, gets over your basic information and very much shortens these conversations. For myself, I enjoy chatting to people, and you get used to the repetition, since the questions and comments are mostly the same.



*The Mill, Morden Hall*

Painting outdoors does not always have to involve an elaborate, highly planned expedition, nor venturing into the unknown. You can get much enjoyment out of simply taking your painting kit along for a couple of hours to some corner of a local park.



*Herbaceous riverside, Barnes*

Painting by the river, I was tucked close under an overhanging embankment wall (mainly to take advantage of a patch of welcome shade) and painted in peace.



*Above the River Wear, Durham*

This is the painting I was working on in the previous photograph. I was there mainly for a family event so had only a very modest painting kit with me – for example, no easel except for the ‘monopod’ in the photograph – but it was still possible to produce a reasonably satisfactory piece of work, and the memory to go with it.



*Painting from Framwellgate bridge, Durham*

(photo: Trudy Hunt) I was on location early in the morning while this very touristy bridge was still quiet – a good time of day to be out painting, if sketching amid crowds of people worries you. The painting is perched – not very well – on a ‘monopod’ support. Note, even in this simple setup, the bit of colour-testing paper clipped to the board.

Rarely – I cannot think offhand of more than three or four times in twenty years – you may get the boisterous drunk, or the disturbingly silent person who sits down beside you for the whole time you are painting;

slightly more often you will get the gentlemen of the street who want the price of a cup of coffee (the price seems to have gone up recently – last time of asking it was the price of a burger). But these are few. The worst you're likely to suffer is the eternally repeated joke by the comedian who'll pose in front of you for five seconds and ask some variation on whether he (or his mate) is, or was, or can be in the picture (no, haven't heard that one, not above a couple of hundred times). Equally common is the dreaded confiding opening statement, after a few preliminary words, that 'I/my mother/my grandmother/my aunt/my sister/my friend is a bit of an artist too ...' which can lead to an extended, if mostly one-sided, conversation. But for the most part people accept you as part of the scenery and are very little bother. Occasionally one of them may even offer to buy your painting!

## **THE NATURE OF THE EXPERIENCE**

So don't let a fear of being seen put you off. As an artist working outdoors you are just another part of the scene, part of the location's life that day. For yourself, as I said in the Introduction, to go painting outdoors is good for you. Rejoice in this rich experience. You'll chat – as much or as little as you want – with people passing by, enjoy or suffer the weather, drop your best brushes in the dust or the mud, stop for a coffee, breathe the fresh air, take a walk, absorb the world around you. You'll soak up the atmosphere, and in time to come, when you open that sketchbook or pull that painting out of its folder, the whole day will come vividly rushing back to you. Try sometimes to forget the tyranny of coming home every time with a painting – get out there for its own sake and you'll have made some great memories instead.



*HQS Wellington, after lockdown*

A fine example of creating a memory rather than just a painting, for this was the first day I had been able to go out painting in London following the coronavirus lockdown. I worked with an enormous sense of liberation, and the very few people about looked as cheerful as I did.

The actual experience of painting outdoors varies widely depending on the location – and of course the weather, which we will consider in a later chapter. Far from worrying about passers-by, you may find yourself painting on a windswept hillside with no one else around, in which case you may possibly be taking an occasional wary glance over your shoulder for cattle approaching. Or you may be beside a river or on a seacoast, keeping an eye on the tide creeping up on you. If you are working in a city location, beware. Much of what looks like public paving or even green space in modern cities is in fact private property, owned by the adjacent buildings; there must presumably be some kind of public right of way over these areas for pedestrians, but if you set up an easel you will have about fifteen

minutes before you are paid a visit by Security, who will have been watching you on CCTV. Some of these gentlemen will be more understanding than others, but in general they do not like easels, which they consider a trip hazard; they also object to you blocking the way if people start to gather to watch you working. Some locations, indeed, even if not on a pedestrian thoroughfare, require you to get in touch with their office beforehand and make arrangements before turning up. Naturally, similar considerations apply to busy and famous tourist hot spots abroad, such as Venice.



#### *Waterloo Station steps*

The viewpoint was from across the road. I was standing – albeit tucked away right against a pillar – on paving which, as it turned out, was not public property but belonged to the huge new centre there. I was promptly picked up on CCTV and visited by three characters from security at roughly half-hour intervals, two of them tolerant, but the middle one fairly unpleasant.



### *Down Villiers Street*

A busy street with narrow pavements, but fortunately there was an unoccupied shop doorway which, though not very deep, enabled me to get me and my stuff mostly out of the way. This was my second painting of the day; the first, from the far side of the station, can be seen as the step-by-step that closes this chapter.

## **OUT IN THE OPEN**

Unless you devote yourself exclusively to finding quiet corners tucked away from view, a fair amount of the time you will find yourself out in the open – after all, that is usually where you will find the most interesting views to paint. Quite apart from the consideration above – that you may effectively be trespassing on private land – as someone working in a public place you should try to be unselfish; you do indeed constitute a potential obstruction, and you have a duty to yourself and to other artists to make yourself as inconspicuous as possible. Please don't get us a bad name! If

you are working in town, try to keep most of your stuff (and yourself) tucked out of the way – disused or closed shop doorways are very handy for this purpose. Being well tucked away in a doorway or against a wall has the additional advantage that no one can stand behind you to watch, if that kind of thing bothers you.



### *Brompton Road*

It was a chilly but clear day in March when I found a sheltered spot – an architectural recess – which offered a fine prospect of the Victoria and Albert Museum. The passers-by were all either on the other side of the road, or too busy with business to bother about me. Five days later the weather was so similar that I returned and painted the view in [Chapter 5](#).



*White Ness Point, Margate*

I had not heeded my own advice about miscalculating the tide. When I arrived here, someone told me that the tide was going out without adding *for how long*. I was painting for some time facing away from the sea, and fortunately already packing up before I realised that the incoming tide had nearly reached me. I had five or ten minutes left before my escape route was cut off.



*HMS Queen Elizabeth, Rosyth*

As a member of the Royal Society of Marine Artists, I was fortunate enough to be invited to see and paint the Royal Navy's latest aircraft carrier under construction at Rosyth. In this kind of situation, your safety is in the hands of the professionals and you simply do what you are told!



*Narrowboat gardens, Little Venice*

An attractive subject as long as you don't think too hard about where I must have been standing. But I was not actually teetering right on the edge of the canal. There was more standing room than is apparent here, and I had a substantial canal boat moored immediately to my left.

One more note on the general theme keeping yourself out of the way – keep yourself and your equipment safe. Don't wear the wrong shoes so that you go skidding off some slimy steps down into a river. Think hard before you paint on any kind of grating or planked walkway where you are likely to lose your brushes, paints or keys down the little slots. Don't paint right on a cliff edge, however inviting the view. Don't miscalculate the tide. Don't set up your easel on a traffic island that's far too small. Don't paint in a field sporting a 'Beware of the Bull' notice. Assess your surroundings with a view to safety – your own, your equipment, and others' – and don't be the cause of someone having to come to your rescue.

## QUIET CORNERS

We all like quiet corners, if we can find them. These are of two kinds: the quiet corner which appears in your painting, but which may be painted from a vantage point which itself is far from quiet, and the quiet corner you have been lucky enough to actually occupy. The first gives an air of tranquillity to your painting, and the second provides an air of tranquillity for yourself. If you are really lucky, the two kinds of quiet corner will coincide. A word of warning about quiet corners that you may wish to occupy, however. This will not be apparent to begin with, but after about thirty minutes, or less in very warm weather, you may come to realise that others beside yourself – dogs, cats, foxes, people – have also thought this was an ideal quiet corner and they have used it for the obvious purposes.



*Southwark Cathedral corner*

Nothing could look more like a quiet corner than this. But in fact, this view was visible only from an awkward angle of Southwark Bridge parapet with constant pedestrian traffic at my back, as well as the noise and tempting smells rising from the bars and restaurants below.



*Canal bridge corner, Camden*

A tranquil scene, but the graffiti at the right suggests just how urban this location really is, and the towpath was busy with pedestrians, commuting cyclists and electric scooter riders. In painting terms, I wanted to focus on the dark bridge and the brilliant light beyond, so deliberately downplayed the shadowing trees in the upper centre.



*Rye, street corner*

A delightful and peaceful corner that for once was both quiet to see and to work in, a genuine backwater with no passing cars and very few people passing by – in fact the character in the distance with the backpack was a fellow artist.



*Fisherman at Richmond*

Anglers, like artists, are very good at finding desirable tucked-away corners. This subject was an ideal opportunity for watercolour, where the delicacy that the medium offers was ideal for rendering the very fine detail of the overhanging twigs and the fisherman's rods and keepnet.

The quietest of all corners, well worth bearing in mind if the weather outside has turned against you – and you must first find someone to seek their permission – is the interior of a church, where the quality of the light

is often wonderful. This is one location where watercolour scores heavily over oils, since an oil painter will have real trouble explaining to the churchwarden that their chosen medium is actually not at all messy and will not smell of white spirit or turps.



*Southwark Cathedral interior*

Having obtained permission to work in the cathedral, I found as inconspicuous a spot as possible while I worked on this study, a great chance to make the most of pale stone greys and inky umbers, with the only spot of colour the flowers by the altar. Most of the background is understated so that the strongly drawn detail of the organ pipes really stands out.

## **PAINTING IN COMPANY**

Then, of course, you don't have to go painting outdoors alone. These days many local and larger art groups offer at least some days outdoors as part of their regular programmes. But you don't even have to belong to one of those formal groups; there is nothing to stop you simply making an informal arrangement with a couple of friends. Interesting things happen once you go out in a group, no matter how few the number, because you'll find yourselves reinforcing each other – maybe, deciding to stick it out on a difficult day, or much more rarely all deciding to quit because it's been so awful. I was responsible for producing the Wapping Group's 75th anniversary book, *A Changing View*, as part of which twenty-nine members were each invited to write a short piece of their own. There was a great uniformity across these pieces, most of them speaking of the pleasures of painting in company with fellow artists, as well as the welcome pint in the pub at the end of the day. And it is indeed a positive experience to paint as part of a group. Apart from anything else, the pressure is on you to attend – it's a date, and you'll feel bad or that you're missing out if you don't. This is regardless of the weather or the location. You find yourself going to places you might not have found for yourself, or it wouldn't have occurred to you to visit, on a day when you might have preferred to stay in a nice comfortable studio. But that's the date, this is the location, this is the weather, and you're stuck with it. This kind of inescapable quality generates a great camaraderie in any group, for you're all in it together.



The 'competition' hard at work: members of the Wapping Group painting along the embankment at Twickenham. Though they may be working at the same spot, everyone seems to find different angles and, of course, different stylistic approaches.

One of the other valuable things about painting in company is that you can – discreetly, of course, fleetingly, while having a quick word about the weather – have a crafty sidelong glance at what your colleague is up to, what subject they have chosen (and why didn't you see that one?) or perhaps open the really big issue of *how they're getting on*. If it's not gone well, they are permitted to grouse, and you to commiserate with them. If it has gone well, they may be permitted, under pressure, to admit that it's not been too bad. And this brings me to the elephant in the room. Of all those Wapping Group members rhapsodising about the joys of painting in company, about the warm camaraderie – every word of it true enough – not one of them raised the other side of working in company, unspoken, though every single one of them is aware of it: this business can be highly competitive. You've done a good painting? I must do a better one! You've

done three paintings today? I must do four! Yes, the red god of the competitive spirit lurks even in the heart of innocent-looking painters.

## PAINTING FURTHER AFIELD

Once you have gained some experience and confidence in working close to home, well, a world is out there waiting for you. There are many groups that offer painting holidays to all sorts of locations abroad; or you can go it alone, taking a travelling version of your painting kit (see [Chapter 2](#)), or simply packing a small sketchbook in your luggage when going on holiday. I can't claim to have globetrotted as much as many well-known artists, who set off every year on expeditions to the far corners of the world, but I have done my fair share. Unusually, perhaps, for an artist, in my other identity as an historical marine artist, I have been fortunate enough to be invited to sail aboard four square-rigged sailing ships – *Star Clipper* in the West Indies, *Royal Clipper* in the Mediterranean, *Sea Cloud II* from the West Indies to Trinidad, and three voyages in the Western Mediterranean aboard the original of them all, the peerless and beautiful *Sea Cloud*. These voyages provided me with some really special ports of call and the experience of being at sea under square sail, in addition to the more exotic experience of trying to paint on board ship. You will see some of those images in this book. I'm not suggesting you should try this. But once you take your paintbox out travelling in other countries, you will certainly have your own adventures, and they will be every bit as special to you as mine are to me.



*San Pietro Martire, Murano*

And so to Venice, the dream city for many painters. I was there to prepare for an exhibition, so I was considering the subjects I found sometimes as works to frame and exhibit in themselves, sometimes as the reference sketches for later studio paintings, some of which would be in oils.



*Plaça de la Mercè, Barcelona*

A cautionary tale. I had arrived the previous evening to bright sunshine, then simply walked around noting likely subjects to paint the following morning. But next day it had clouded right over and the things I had looked at in sunshine were nothing like as appealing; this was the best choice I could find.



*The citadel, Calvi*

During one of my *Sea Cloud* voyages, the itinerary was changed completely due to stormy conditions in the Golfe du Lion, so we sailed direct from Minorca to Corsica. I produced this study on the largest size of paper I had brought, only 12 × 9in (30.5 × 23cm). Generally I was using Arches paper but, unusually, that batch behaved badly for some reason – the sea air, perhaps – and I was very grateful that I also had some Fabriano.

## STEP BY STEP: SLOANE SQUARE

It would be hard to think of a busier location than this one, Chelsea's Sloane Square, which is constantly teeming with people and traffic. My original idea had been to find a view and paint from the centre of the square itself, but obviously it had been some time since I'd considered this as a painting location, because when I arrived I saw that much of the square's central island has now been occupied by two or three cafés and restaurants, leaving little room to walk about and much less choice of view. To add to my difficulties, it was one of those overcast days, the sky in varying shades of light grey with occasional fitful sunlight. So I walked around for quite a long time before settling upon this view from Sedding Street, looking south across the corner of the square. I was attracted to the architectural details of the building opposite, while the lower left quarter supplied me with a very dark note in the mass of foliage, which was not going to change much, regardless of what the light did. Though mostly a study in greys, there were some welcome colour notes, mainly in the prominent reds of a signboard and the buses.



### **Step 1, pencil drawing**

With such a complex scene there are basically two options: draw the whole thing accurately in detail, which itself will take a couple of hours, or indicate the main areas quite loosely and then spend your valuable time on pulling back the detail in the later stages of painting.



### **Step 2, wash-in**

I mixed up washes of a blue-grey and a pinkish stone colour then wetted the upper part with clear water before swabbing the two mixes loosely around the clear area. I was so anxious to indicate some strength and some colour in what was potentially a grey scene that I immediately dipped into the palette and placed the strong notes shown here before the first wash was dry.



### **Step 3, first development**

In my mind, though to begin with not consciously, I had divided the work on this painting into the upper two-thirds and the very involved lower third. I started working from the top down, and the paper was still damp enough that a nice softness remained in the architectural detail.



### **Step 3, second development**

Leaving the top two-thirds where it was for the moment, I now moved down to the lower third, where I had to observe the traffic and very quickly make a selection of some of the constantly changing vehicles. The easiest one was the bus – not that any *one* bus stayed there the whole time, but there was frequently a bus in that same spot.



#### **Step 4, to finish**

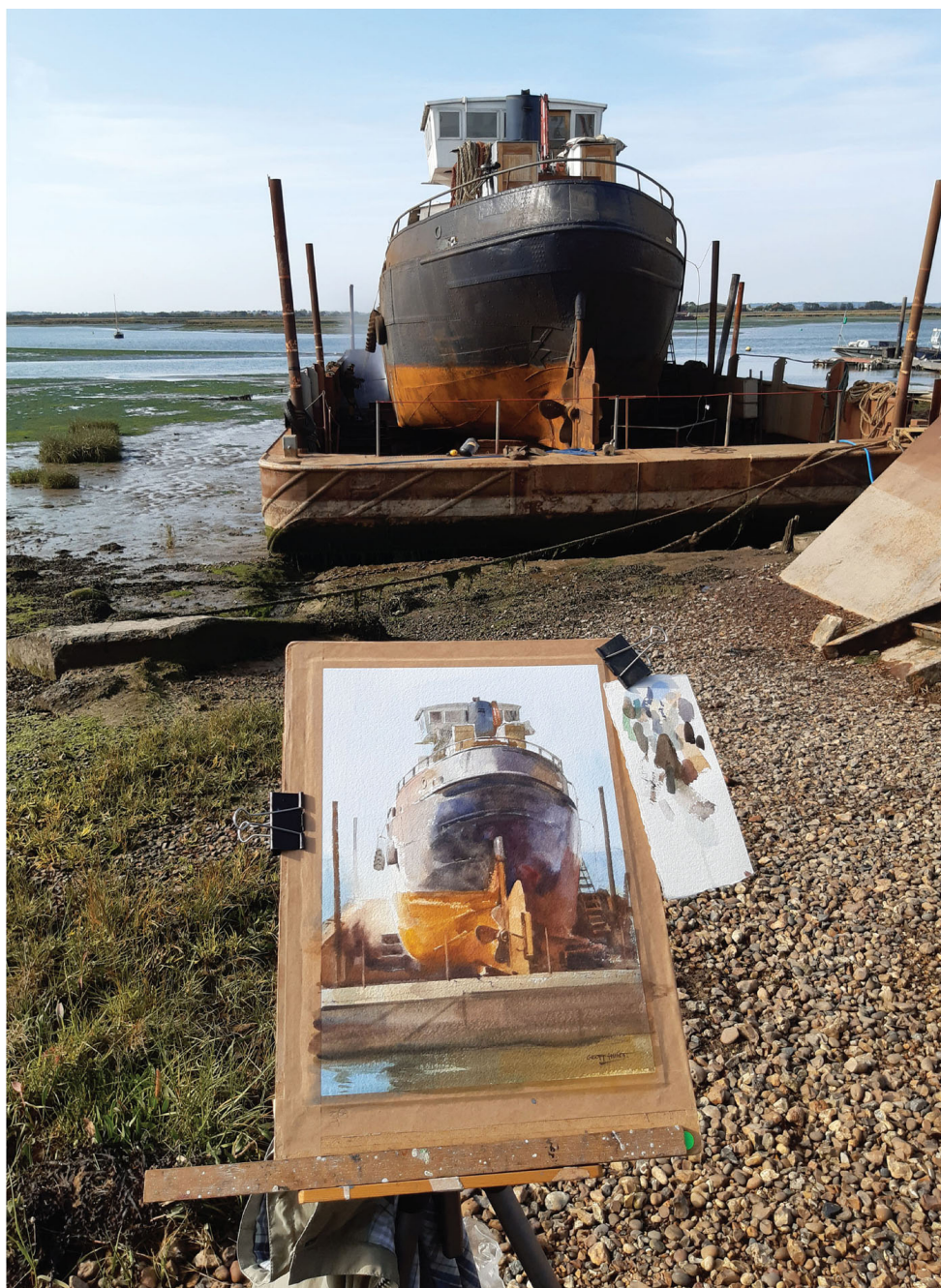
There was quite a lot of fine detail finishing to be done all over the painting, working from the rooftop downwards and clarifying drawing, especially in the vehicles. But there was also some 'unpainting' to be done – lifting out the pavement at the left to make that corner more obvious, as well as blurring some of the foliage at the right with clear water to make it recede a little.

## CHAPTER 2

# MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT

## YOUR STUDIO OUTDOORS

It is impossible to take everything you would ideally like to take outdoors, but the aim must be to take the minimum you need to enable you to work and, once there, to be able to create around yourself a personal space, a tiny studio environment. If you're like me, you'll probably find that this 'minimum' still amounts to a lot of things and a considerable weight.



A typical scene painting on site (the finished painting of the *J J Prior* appears in [Chapter 3](#)), showing my painting board loaded with a 14 × 10in (35.5 × 25.5cm) paper. Note the scrap of paper clipped to the board for paint testing, and the 'mahl' stick resting on the very shallow ledge at the bottom of the board.

Most outdoor painters, myself included, prefer to carry their stuff in a backpack or rucksack of some kind. It will be heavy, but in the field it works better than the other alternative, a pull-along trolley. A trolley is great on a smooth surface, but once you go off that surface, as you

inevitably will – say, on to a gravel path, or a muddy towpath, or if you want to get over a fence, or down onto a riverbank at low tide; or if, in a more urban setting, you encounter a flight of stairs – you will soon wish you had a backpack instead. Given the weight, make sure that you have the right bag to start with. Anything with two shoulder straps is more comfortable to hike with, but once you have arrived at your painting spot you will want other qualities too. I prefer the kind of bags that anglers use – these are not really ideal to hike with for any distance, but they are great when you arrive since they can be set down square on the ground and opened up almost like a box. And they usually have lots of extra outside pockets.



A general view of the main elements I take: easel, painting board, painting bag, a very light stool serving as a tabletop. Note the piece of cord tied to the easel, the usual precaution against gusts of wind. (Photo: Rick Holmes)

You will also get used to finding favourable locations on what you might call the micro scale, by which I mean the immediate bit of ground you are proposing to stand on. Is it level, or soft? Is it wet (important if you like your bag to stay dry)? If it's grass, is it springy or tussocky? You don't want the easel falling over halfway through painting, and sloping ground

can be very tiring to stand on, though sometimes you will be prepared to accept this. On the same theme of protecting the easel, what about shelter from the wind – is there a bit of low wall or a bush you can stand the easel behind? If not, is there something handy you can tie the easel to? Gusty wind can be your worst enemy and has a bearing on exactly what you take outdoors – not least the size of your painting board. Too big a board will catch the wind more easily and your easel will blow over, usually with the painting face down.

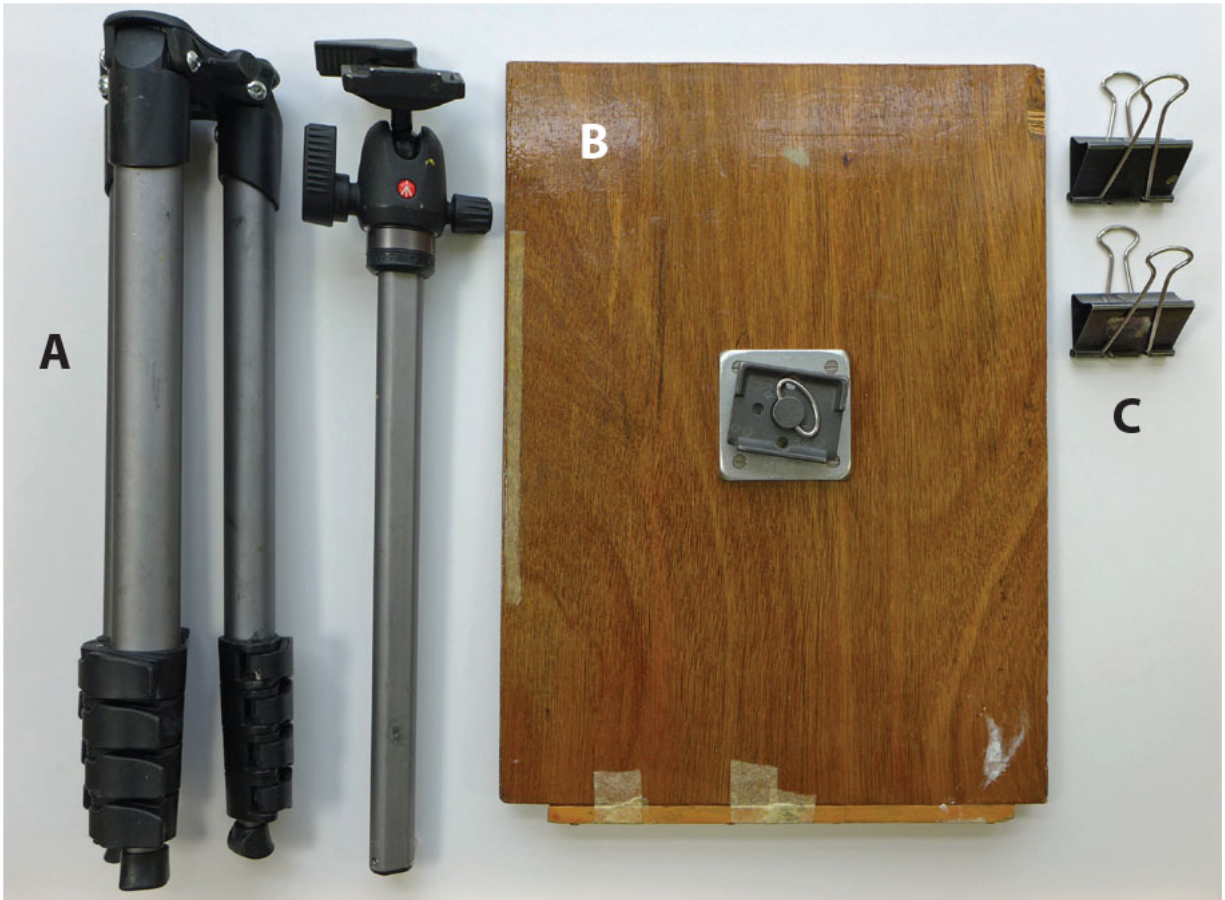
Every outdoor painter through experience develops a personal kit which works for them, often including homemade items. For me, one of the attractions about switching over from oils to watercolour was that I thought it would be cleaner, and there would be less to carry. What could be cleaner than water? What painting kit could be lighter? It turned out that I was wrong about both these things; you can get into many a fine mess with watercolour, though the finished paintings are indeed much easier to transport than wet oils, and my painting bag weighed not far off the same – about 10kg (22lb) when loaded up with painting water, some drinking water, something to eat, and a pullover (which you will be glad of, except on the very hottest day). However, I also need to carry a small pack of painting boards and a very light tripod seat, which I usually use not to sit on, but as somewhere to put things. It is possible to work with a lighter painting kit than this and we will look at these possibilities later.

The following is a description of what I always take and what I have found most useful. Once you start to paint outdoors you will soon find what suits your own way of working best; after a couple of seasons, you will develop a personalised kit that provides what you need, but which you also find manageable to carry. Even so, the best you can hope for is that most of the time, this arrangement will work. After all, you will be working in the field (sometimes literally so), at the mercy of the weather, and even after years of experience there will still be odd days, conditions or situations that you really were not prepared for. Best to turn those into tall stories to tell your friends afterwards. And even those bad days can sometimes delight – a wonderfully clearing evening sky after a grim stormy afternoon, for example.

## **THE EASEL AND THE ‘WORKING BOARD’**

Unless you are doing the very lightest version of sketching, you will need an easel and some sort of support or working board. My arrangement consists of a homemade working board on a telescopic photo tripod – most artists now use these. My board is 5mm plywood, about  $14.5 \times 10.75$ in\*, well varnished, with a very small shelf or ledge, about the width of a pencil, glued and screwed at the bottom. At the centre of the back is glued and screwed a camera tripod mounting bracket – these are available from the better artists' suppliers – which accepts a standard photographic camera shoe, which in turn clips onto a lightweight photo tripod. My tripod folds to only about 40cm (15¾in), small enough to fit in my bag. Like the easel, the work board is key to your being able to work. Although small, it is effectively your drawing board or your desktop outdoors, and you will find that your attention becomes amazingly focused on that scrap of panel. You'll also need a couple of decent bulldog clips.

\*A note on dimensions: the art world has been slow to catch up with metrication, so most people and suppliers still refer to painting panels, canvases, stretcher pieces, sketchbooks and so on in inches. Rather than switch here and there from one to the other, I have used inches throughout the book, but metric equivalents have been given wherever possible.



A. The tripod easel, which comes apart in two parts for handier storage in the bag.

B. My fairly battered working board, back view. Here the camera shoe is already screwed into the mounting bracket. At the bottom is the very small ledge or shelf.

C. The essential bulldog clips. These are the fold-back variety, very strong and useful, but be careful about over-loading these: I once had one snap in half explosively, and I never did find half of it.

## PAPERS AND SIZES

You can work on pieces of paper, on commercially available blocks of paper or sketchbooks. I prefer to use pieces of paper cut to a handy size and taped using traditional brown gumstrip to individual boards. These boards are preferably plywood, this time as thin as you can get it. Make these boards a handy size: I often use boards about  $12\frac{1}{2} \times 17\frac{1}{2}$ in ( $31.8 \times 45$ cm) and  $12 \times 15$ in ( $30.5 \times 38$ cm). Cutting paper to fit within those dimensions, while allowing for the overlap of the gumstrip, produces finished paintings

of roughly  $10 \times 14$ in ( $25.5 \times 35.5$ cm) and  $9 \times 12$ in ( $23 \times 30.5$ cm) respectively, a couple of generally convenient sizes and formats. I carry two boards loaded with prepared paper, plus extra pieces of paper. More than two boards begins to add a bit too much weight, though I will take a larger range of sizes if I am using the car. Plywood is stronger and lighter than hardboard or MDF, while they also tend to retain water or dampness on their surfaces, meaning that your paper is more likely to stay damp throughout. Of course, there are times – a scorching summer's day, say – when this could be a positive advantage. It's a good idea to give these panels one coat of varnish for a bit of weatherproofing, but not more than one, otherwise the gumstrip will fail to stick. Of the other alternatives, blocks of paper can be handy if travelling on holiday. They don't take kindly to working very wet, as after a couple of outings there is a tendency for the whole block to start ungluing from its card backing board, but otherwise they are useful. Spiral-bound sketchbooks are also fine in their way, but have the disadvantage that, again, the paper will curl if you try to use ambitious washes on it. I will have more to say about papers in [Chapter 4](#).



A view of the board and easel setup in action (this painting can be seen as the 'step by step' ending [Chapter 7](#)). Note again the scrap paper clipped to the board, to try out colours; and the essential length of cord holding the easel back against wind gusts – here, tied back to a particularly thorny bush.



A. Painting board loaded up with paper. I use the heavier weights of paper, which are just gumstripped to the boards. It is not necessary to soak and stretch these, as you have to do with lighter weights.

B. Typical spiral-bound sketchbook.

C. An assortment of papers. When you cut up sheets of paper, remember to pencil some kind of shorthand reference for yourself on the corner of each individual piece so that later on you'll know which paper it was – and which way up the manufacturers intended it to be.

D. A typical glued-edge block of paper.

## PAINTBOXES AND PALETTES

Some people get on very well with the traditional type of paintbox filled with pans of solid colour, but if you are contemplating a larger scale of work, in concept if not in physical size – a grander use of gesture – it is better to use tubes, as you can so easily squeeze out plenty of paint to mix up a generous wash. If you are planning to do a lot of painting outdoors, the

usual type of readily available paintbox (enamelled tin, as it used to be) will probably take a real bashing, and the constant wetting is likely to rust the hinges fairly quickly. If you are serious it is worth seeking out one of the few makers of handmade brass boxes. These boxes are expensive, and you'll have to join the lengthy queue for your personal one to be made. The bigger ones are heavy, certainly too heavy to hold in a hand for any length of time, but they give you a feeling of solid confidence, and they don't skitter around when you stick a big brush into them. And remember those gusty winds: the open lid of a brass box is much less likely to flip shut in the wind. Conversely, an advantage of the standard 'tin' box, as indeed with smaller size paintboxes, is that, being so much lighter, they can readily be held in the hand – they are generally fitted with a thumb-ring on the back to allow this more easily.

Unless you are a very restrained and neat painter you will certainly need some extra paint-mixing space over and above that which a paintbox lid offers, however cleverly designed it may be. Plastic palettes are all very well, but they suffer the same problems as a lightweight paintbox; they will skitter about, dumping your carefully mixed washes in all directions, and are very prone to you 'just catching' the edges of them and emptying their contents on the ground. As with tin paintboxes, they are also subject to being blown around by the wind. Unfortunately, the alternative is both heavy and breakable, that alternative being small ceramic dishes – ramekin dishes are often ideal for this, and it's worth searching for just the right one (as with so many art materials, kitchen shops are a great place to search for useful things, as are camping shops). Although heavy and vulnerable to breaking, small china dishes are so valuable for mixing up decent amounts of wash that I compromise by carrying two of them, well wrapped in a rag, plus two plastic dishes (which I think were once part of an airline meals service) – I usually just use these latter for extra touches of dark and green mixes (because I want to keep green out of my paintbox as much as possible), and hold them in my hand as necessary.

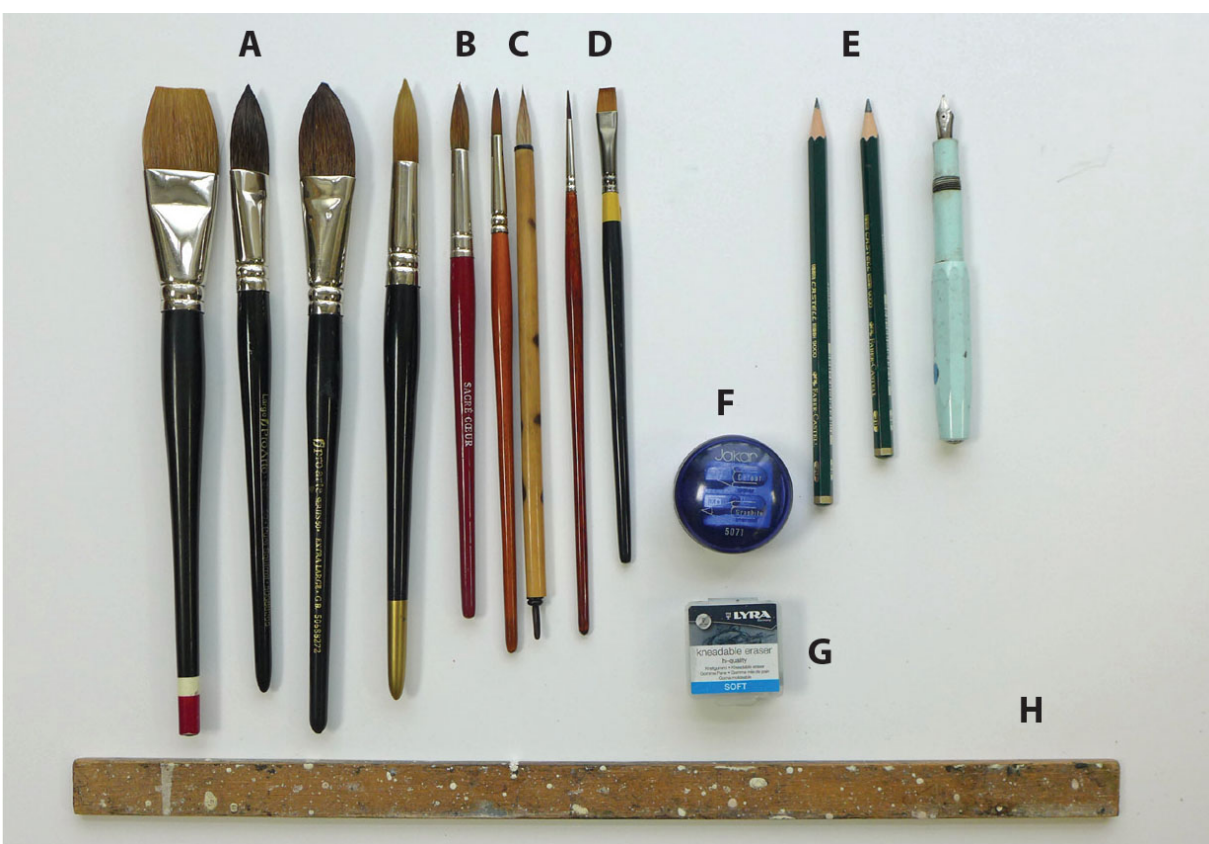


- A. A paintbox of the 'enamelled tin' variety, which you find in most art shops.  
 B. A large box, hand made in brass by Craig Young. This one measures 10.5 × 24cm (4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>in) and weighs 650g (1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>lb).  
 C. My other smaller handmade brass box.  
 D. Two ceramic mixing pots.  
 E. A plastic mixing dish.  
 F. A very small pocket sketching box. You can go even smaller than this, as we will see in [Chapter 6](#).

## BRUSHES, PENCILS AND PENS

I carry about a dozen brushes, a selection of which is seen here – three wash brushes (there never seem to be enough of these) backed up by a couple of big size 12 or 14 sables; a few smaller sharpish brushes; one or two Japanese brushes of the sort used for calligraphy; and one sharp square brush for lifting out (see [Chapter 4](#)). Good watercolour brushes are expensive but they will last for ages if you treat them well, and in the context of outdoor painting that means carrying them in a good, padded

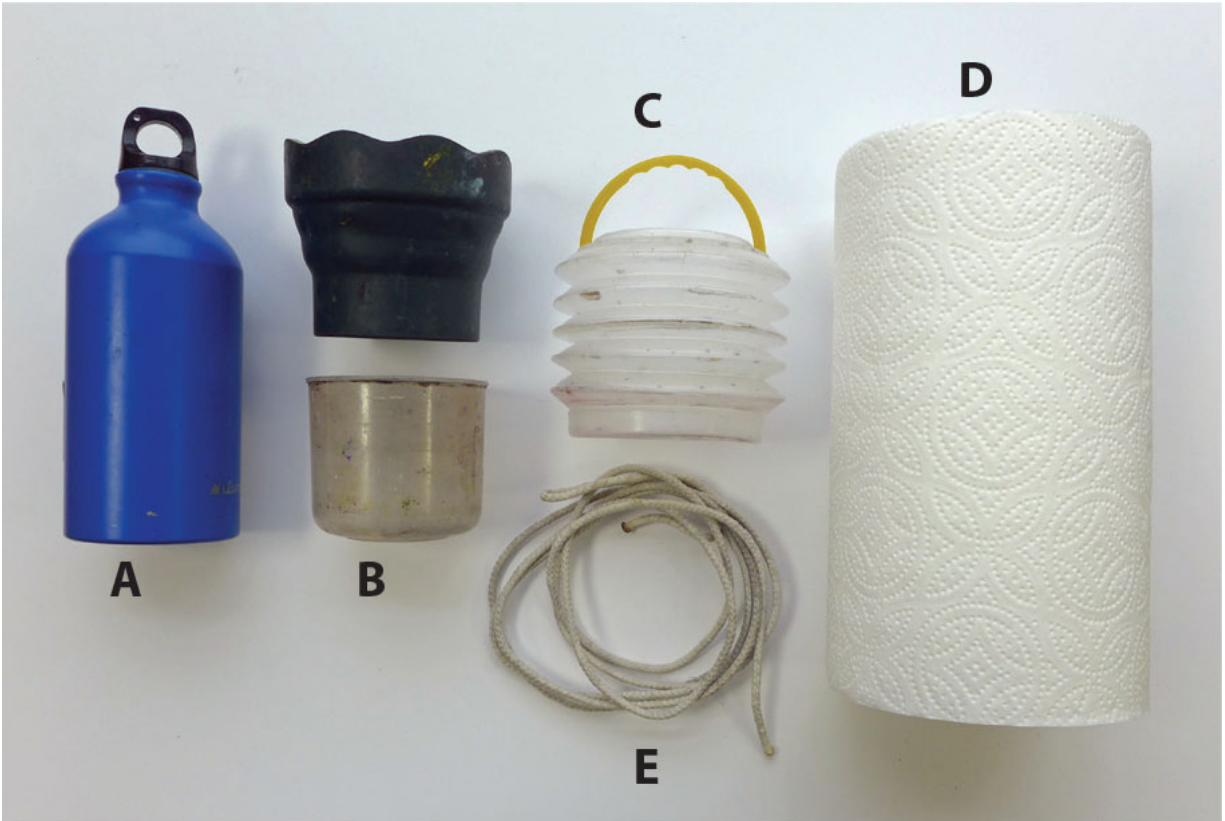
folder (not forgetting to mark it clearly so you know which way up it is when it goes into the bag), and at the end of the day always washing all of them out properly in clean water and shaping the points. *Never* skip this essential chore, no matter how tired you are! Then you'll need a few pencils, a sharpener, a putty rubber and a pen, in case the impulse strikes to do a bit of line work. I like to use an old, fairly fine-nibbed fountain pen. One other thing I find essential is the very grubby bit of wooden stick featured here. I believe the correct term for this should be a 'mahl stick', but whatever you call it, it is indispensable as a combined straight-edge and hand-rest.



- A. Three wash brushes.
- B. Assorted traditional watercolour brushes.
- C. A Japanese weasel hair calligraphy brush.
- D. Chisel-end brush, mainly used for lifting out but also very useful for painting detail such as brick or stone.
- E. Assorted pencils and a pen.
- F. Pencil sharpener.
- G. Putty rubber.
- H. The 'mahl stick'.

## WATER

Water is amazingly heavy, and you have to compromise between the amount of water you think you'll need, and what you're prepared to carry. After some experimentation I have settled on a half-litre metal bottle with a screw top (which you will find in hiking and camping shops). I use metal because things tend to get battered about inside a painting bag, especially if you keep the folding easel there as well, and you don't want to open your bag to find it awash with water. Half a litre will just about do for a couple of paintings. If you need more, or plan to be out all day, you will either have to carry a full litre, or raid your personal drinking bottle, or search for some water on location. This is not difficult in town with all the cafés and shops, but can be tricky out in the countryside. Then comes the question of what you're going to put that water in. Because I place everything I can possibly fit on my 'tabletop', I use two pots, a plastic pot plus one of those very useful collapsible green water pots. One is for clean water and one for progressively dirtier water. Also shown here is another kind of collapsible water pot, this one with a carrying handle. Watercolour artists who don't use my tabletop approach instead improvise a way to hang such a pot from their easel, then hand-hold their paintbox. This way they can remain standing all the time, whereas I have to keep constantly half bending down to my tabletop. A couple of other essentials appear in this frame: a roll of kitchen paper (no need to carry a whole roll, but you will need to take quite a lot, probably about twice what you first think), and a length of cord. I use this to strap my work board and painting boards together for carrying, but once unstrapped this cord doubles as that other essential – a tie-down for your easel in case the wind gets up.



- A. Half-litre metal water bottle.  
B. Water-pots. Upper: collapsible (which also has the very useful scalloped top to rest brushes on.) Lower: ordinary plastic pot.  
C. The collapsible 'lantern' style water pot with handle.  
D. Kitchen paper. It's worth experimenting with the different brands, as some of them are more absorbent and useful than others.  
E. The all-purpose length of cord.

## **PAINTS**

I show here most of the paints I usually carry, and which appear in my favourite paintbox, though back in the studio I have boxes and boxes of other tubes, as I can't help buying new ones and trying out different makes just to see if this particular colour or that particular manufacturer is somehow going to make some magical difference. In general, I carry larger tubes for the paints I use most often, and smaller ones for those I replenish less often; or I may simply look over the box at the start of the day, refill the less-used ones, then I can leave those tubes behind. As you will see from the photographs of my paintbox in action, my favourite colours tend to be from the 'ish' range – brownish, greyish, blueish, greenish – and I don't pay

very much attention to how these colour mixes arise. This may sound like a recipe for a complete mess, and so it would be with oil paint, where you would create lots of mud colour. But with watercolour the natural luminosity will usually allow you to get away with this careless abuse of colours, as long as the painting is strong enough in its overall drawing and design and has enough lights and darks. Once in a while, if I want a particularly clear and pure colour, I will have to take some tissue and clean a palette, then clear up an area of colour or else squeeze out some pristine paint from the tube.



A typical selection of the colours I usually carry, and a typical mixture of brands also. From top left: cadmium lemon, cadmium yellow, raw sienna light (or yellow ochre), cadmium orange, permanent rose, burnt sienna, raw umber, burnt umber, cobalt violet, cobalt blue, ultramarine blue, manganese blue, cobalt turquoise light, black, gouache white, and finally sepia or graphite grey – mostly used only for line work.

## AND ALL THE OTHER STUFF

There are a few other things to consider packing, not illustrated here, but which I usually carry, and they are: a small, light and light-coloured umbrella which doubles as a sunshade, and which you can very quickly whip up if it comes on to rain (it won't keep you dry for long, but it will protect your painting while you are frantically packing up); one of those very useful folding kneeling pads for the gravelly or hard places – wonderfully comfortable when you have to kneel down to pack or unpack; and quite a lot of odd bits of rag, mainly to stop metal things in the bag battering and damaging each other. Then there's a bit of plastic sheet, sometimes useful to put your bag on. A penknife can be useful, as can a very small water mister. And, as I said earlier, your personal comforts: food, a flask, a pullover, maybe sunscreen, and so on. It all has to go in the bag.



The smaller Craig Young box which I generally carry. Since these boxes are hand-made to order anyway, I got Craig to make me a customised version of one of his usual range – this type is usually made with eight more colour pans in the centre, plus a couple of extra small flaps. I dispensed with both these elements as I wanted a bigger mixing space in the middle. Incidentally, an unexpected characteristic of the finely made heavy brass box is that, once closed tight, it keeps all the colours and mixes wet for a long period – until next day, if necessary, or even longer – so you can get into your next painting that much faster.



An absolutely typical overhead view of my 'tabletop' in action at a late stage of a painting. There is, of course, never enough room for everything, especially since by this point a cup of tea or coffee has usually materialised as well. Right in the centre of this collection you see another improvised piece of kit which I use sometimes, consisting of two small plastic pots taped together, one carrying a dark blue-grey wash and the other something like sepia. These are convenient to dip a pen into for line work.

Travelling to paint further afield – a dedicated painting trip by air, say, or simply adding some painting kit to your usual packing when going on holiday – nearly always requires simplification of your equipment to a greater or lesser extent. And heaven knows, as an outdoor painter you have surely already pared what you need down to the minimum. What else can you possibly leave out? Well, travelling kit can range from the 'almost full' – when you will be taking an easel, lots of spare papers, extra tubes of paint and so on – right down to the 'totally minimum' (see [Chapter 6](#)). But whether you're at one or other of these two extremes or somewhere in between, you will need to devote some thought and experimentation to what you carry.

You will need to find the right bag, bearing in mind that you will want to use this at least as a cabin bag when travelling by air, or maybe train or bus, so it needs to fit in an overhead locker; but just as with your more usual painting bag, you'll need such a bag to work from once you get there. I use a wonderfully handy carry-on bag which has wheels and a handle, so I can pretend to be a respectable traveller going through the airport, but it also has rucksack-style back straps for traipsing about on location. This does well for a day's painting trip containing nothing much except painting kit, and for an overnight stay with very minimal personal effects. For a longer stay or a holiday you will also have hold luggage for your personal stuff.

The internal dimensions of this bag will govern the size of working board that you can take – something like 12 × 15in (30.5 × 38cm) at most, and you won't want it to be a tight fit either, or you will not be able to overstuff this bag as you will almost certainly need to. Usually, that will mean that your paper sizes will be that much smaller. I don't like working without an easel, so my own next priority is my compact and light telescopic camera tripod. Once, aboard *Sea Cloud* and not having taken an easel with me, I became so frustrated by the lack of one that after a couple of days I bought a cheap easel locally and gave it to the ship at the end of the week, but that is a little drastic. I usually stand up to paint but, as explained earlier, I take a tripod stool as a sort of tabletop on which to put things. Packing an easel in my cabin bag leaves no room for this stool, so that has to be left at home if I am travelling light. But working outdoors you can quite often find a convenient bit of wall or tree stump or something similar where you can put your stuff down. If you prefer to work sitting down, you will want to pack your favourite stool or folding chair instead of the easel. I find it uncomfortable and awkward to work for any length of time sitting down while holding a board or pad, but some artists manage very well. If you like to work this way, there is a helpful gadget, a sort of monopod (see [Chapter 1](#)), consisting simply of a large bulldog clip mounted on a single telescopic leg: you clip your sketchpad on to this and prop the pad on your knees.



*Sunday mass, Nerja*

I sometimes call sketches like this 'holiday snaps', but once you try you will find that they are so much more than their photographic counterparts. Sitting down in one place for an hour or so while drawing and painting really seems to fix the memory and the whole sense of that hour or so in a way that photographs never do.



*Painting in Malamocco*

Out on the Venetian Lido, a bus ride away from the ferries, lies the quiet village of Malamocco. Having had a fairly traumatic couple of days already (traumatic because I was supposed to be painting for an exhibition, but it just kept pouring with rain), it was a relief to find a nice subject and a dry day. (Photo: Trudy Hunt)



*Santa Maria, Malamocco*

A peaceful afternoon's painting. Unusually – for this time I had managed to pack both an easel and a tripod stool – I am sitting down to work. Just next to me is the cabin bag, which I am using as a day bag for my painting kit.



*By San Giorgio Maggiore*

The tourist hot spots in Venice are extremely busy and even if you can find a tiny patch of space on which to paint, you are likely to be moved on very shortly by patrolling police. But get away from the major hot spots and it is not all that difficult to find peace and tranquillity. This was on the Giudecca side, looking back northeast.

## PACKING JUST ENOUGH

With those large essentials established, everything else that you have to fit into that bag now becomes a process of minimising. This is not at all easy, since you need to greatly reduce what you carry; but on the other hand, if you're out painting for a few days or a week, you will need to take everything you possibly can – in fact, ideally, you'll want to take even more than you normally have for a single day's painting. If, like me, you carry a number of papers ready mounted on ply boards, you'll need to reduce that number of boards to a minimum, probably just two, cutting a good stock of spare paper pieces to fit those boards (if travelling by air, do remember *not*

to pack your usual penknife or a craft blade!). It's easy enough to carry a small roll of brown gumstrip to mount up fresh pieces of paper each day, but you may have to explain your odd behaviour in the hotel bathroom or wherever – just what are you getting up to with all that brown paper and water and one of the hotel knives? Then you have to give some thought to what you're going to do with your finished work, of which you hope there'll be lots. You don't want to risk those precious paintings by carrying them around the whole time in your daily working bag, but if you put your paintings in another bag (a suitcase lid is very useful for this), then they will need to be sandwiched between a couple of reasonably substantial bits of board for protection. Instead of carrying loose cut paper, this is one time when you may find it more convenient to carry glued-edge paper blocks instead (if you do this, remember that you'll have to slice off each sheet as you use it, which is not that easy when you have left your penknife at home. Borrow a knife from the hotel, perhaps?).

You may be able to manage with fewer brushes than usual, which will allow you to use a smaller brush folder or maybe a brush tube instead. Your usual paintbox may be too big and heavy, and you'll want to switch to a smaller one. There's no avoiding the need to carry extra tubes of paint for refilling the paintbox but, again, you'll have to estimate the minimum stock you will need and so be able to take a smaller container. You'll still need some extra mixing space but this time you will probably have to settle for plastic palettes instead of ceramic. You'll have to leave behind your umbrella or sunshade and rely on finding local shelter or shade instead, unless you buy something locally. And so on.

However, by now you should be thoroughly imbued with the outdoor painter's ethos, where every new difficulty, every shortcoming, every obstacle, just makes you that much more determined to get your work done regardless. Despite everything, you can brag to your friends when you are home again, you did all this – you were there, you saw it, you painted it, and here is the very proof. Proportional to the difficulty, the sense of triumph you feel if you have managed to travel *and* paint is that much greater than in your usual painting trips closer to home. Travelling, of course, offers more than just a mere extension of painting close to home – more subjects, of course, and an awareness of a whole different environment. For example, for several years I had a very enjoyable working relationship with Mystic Seaport in Connecticut, and would go there

frequently. Every time I arrived, I would be struck by the different, brighter quality in the light, since Connecticut, perhaps surprisingly, is quite a long way further south than England.



*The old harbour, Mystic*

Mystic Seaport is a large site which includes a working shipyard, immense boat storage sheds, research facilities and a museum, all encircling a harbour where the appearance of a nineteenth-century port has been reconstructed using historic wooden buildings.



Typical of the kind of working improvisation that can happen when you are travelling, the chair is courtesy of Mystic Seaport. The paintbox seen here is actually the 'heavy' Craig Young box which I used to use before I commissioned a lighter version. Note the use of two collapsible water pots.

## STEP BY STEP: AUTUMN IN THE SURREY HILLS

Once you are equipped, the general appearance of your 'studio outdoors' in action will probably look something like this. This location, though affording a great view, was

particularly awkward to work in, partly because it was on a slope and partly because the grass underfoot was both springy and tussocky, which was no real problem for the easel but proved very difficult for my 'tabletop' tripod stool. In the end I had to wedge this with the painting bag to stop it toppling over. On the other hand, the very thing that made this an awkward site – halfway down a fairly rough bit of hillside – meant that the entire time I was there, although I occasionally saw dog walkers and hikers in the distance, not a soul came near me. I did have to worry about cattle, however, since they are often on the hillside, and I had to keep half an eye out for them. As far as the day was concerned, I was looking straight into late afternoon September sunshine, and although I did not have too much of a problem with this, my camera did, reading the landscape and my painting itself as very dark against the bright sky, which is sometimes apparent in the stages of this step-by-step painting.



A studio outdoors in the Surrey hills.



### **Step 1, pencil drawing**

As this was going to be mostly an atmospheric study of lighting and autumn colours I did very little in the way of drawing, just an indication of the sweep of the landscape and the tree-clad hillside at the right.



### **Step 2, wash-in**

As with the drawing, the wash-in stage was extremely simple, consisting of a couple of wash mixes, one mostly cobalt blue with cobalt violet, the other mostly light raw sienna. Having first washed some clear water into the sky and the far distance, I swabbed these mixes quite freely across the paper, just being careful to leave one ribbon of light for the railway that winds through the valley.



### **Step 3, wash-in intervention**

While the first washes were still wet, I very quickly brushed in some really dark notes to establish the nearby trees framing the hillside. You can see how this paint blurs and spreads across the wet surface, but has much sharper definition at the top right where the paper was drier, perhaps because this area was less wet to begin with. This kind of accidental and dramatic mark-making is what gladdens the heart of the watercolourist.



#### **Step 4, first development**

General progress across the painting, introducing soft clouds into the sky then working from top to bottom, always trying to secure the wonderful atmospheric recession and the subtle colouring. The paper was staying quite damp and I was fighting to establish the right tonal values, since the overpainted layers were constantly part-drying much too light.



#### **Step 5, second development**

The autumn afternoon was wearing on, and as it did so the light changed a lot. A series of cloud shadows was now moving steadily over the landscape and I employed one of these quite strongly in the mid-to-far distance – it brought out the contrast with the bleached yellow brown of the fields, which I had not touched since the beginning. And I now started to make dark detailing marks in the foreground, a tangle of bramble and dry stalks and stems.



### **Step 6, final**

The somewhat different colouring in this final image is entirely due to it being photographed the next morning in the studio, where the light was quite different from what the camera had seen the previous afternoon, although I have tried to make the necessary correction. But the final touches are evident, consisting mainly of highlighting a few of the foreground leaves and a few backlit edges of the trees, which were done with just a little opaque colour (see [Chapter 4](#)).

## CHAPTER 3

# FINDING A SUBJECT

## LEARNING TO SEE

When you are starting out as an outdoor painter, and often for many years afterwards, finding a subject to paint can be surprisingly difficult. To exaggerate only a little, it is perfectly possible to walk around Venice for three hours and *not see* anything, or at any rate anything you feel able to paint. This can be most discouraging. It's not your fault: you need to realise that for this, like many other things in life, you need to be taught to do it properly; but unlike those other things, in this case of seeing images you probably have not realised that you need a teacher, and what is worse, that people who can train you to see are very hard to find. So most of us still have to learn the hard way by training ourselves through years of experience, through trial and error, getting used to going out and looking for subjects, painting and failing, judging how much you can tackle in a given time, going to exhibitions to see how other artists work and what subjects they find, and so on. A fair amount of work, then, and for all of us the process never ends.



*By St Paul's: ancient and modern*

The contemporary urban scene affords lots of opportunities for contrasts in architectural style such as this, and watercolour is particularly well adapted to this kind of subject, since it will render both the shimmering glass towers of skyscrapers and the fine stonework of an ancient church tower.

Artists have different approaches to finding their subjects outdoors. I often find myself setting out with an expectation in mind, a preconception of what I will do, and this approach can cause much sorrow. Memory can

be faulty. You might go off for the day with the fixed idea of painting a subject you know well, from a viewpoint you also think you know well, only to find when you arrive that actually the view is obscured by trees, which you didn't remember at all; or that the light is all wrong on the day for that subject, or that the view and the light are fine, but then someone parks a large white van in front of you after the first twenty minutes' work. So you may not come home with the painting you expected to bring back (incidentally, the best view of anywhere is usually to be had from the middle of the road, but your painting time if you set up easel in such a location is likely to be extremely short).

## WHAT THE DAY IS TELLING YOU

Just to venture for a moment into philosophical waters, painting outdoors, no matter what medium you use, is not about recording a snapshot of a view. You might as well – you might far better – take a photograph. Nor is it even, to stretch the idea of 'recording of a view', as is often claimed, about seeing and recording an extended span of time, two hours or so, in the life of the world you are observing. Nor is it, again, about your unconscious editing of what you see – what to include, what to leave out – though it is all these things too. No: we are not cameras, and the experience of seeing and painting is not one way. Instead, we cannot help projecting a version of our own idealised image on to what is before us – what we would like it to be, what we would like it to represent – perhaps even a projection of our current emotional state. Turner, for example, entertained grandiose visions of just about everything he saw, but perhaps he did not really think that, say, Conway Castle reared four hundred feet straight out of a stormy sea. Still, if we are trying to be honest, we should not set out – as I have, plenty of times – with a fixed image in mind of what we will see, of what it should look like. That leads only to repetition, to a stock response. Instead, there is a point, a plane, an interface, between the objective reality of the scene (though we understand there is no such thing) and your expectation of it, and you must be sensitive to that. You want to bring something of yourself to what you are painting, but you must be open to see and listen too: what is *it* trying to tell *you*? And this is as true of portraiture or still-life painting as of plein-air painting.

So, how do you find out what is the day trying to tell you? A big part of this is the initial search for a subject, involving what I call 'walking the pitch'. This simply means strolling along quite slowly, frequently stopping to stare, frequently turning around to see the reverse view – don't forget to do this, you may miss something! – and generally behaving like an idiot. You might find something in the first hundred yards, or you might have to walk a mile, or you might – temporarily, you hope – give up in despair and go for a coffee instead. But don't just think about the tangible objects you can see – trees, buildings, landscape, riverbanks. Try also to sense: what kind of a day is it? What can you feel, what is the experience you would like to convey? Maybe it's a misty morning. Maybe it's getting on towards evening. Maybe it's autumn, or spring. Maybe it's a sense of bustle, or on the contrary, a sense of calm. You might convey the former by filling your paper with a mass of busy detail, or the latter by leaving masses of clear space. But don't worry too much if you cannot find a subject right away, or even for quite a time; this happens to us all. Finding a subject is a knack that gets easier with experience as you grow more accustomed to the kinds of subjects which are most congenial to you, and which you become more confident in tackling.



*A misty start, Cadogan Pier*

This would actually turn out to be a very hot, sultry day which ended in a thunderstorm, but the morning began with this beautiful misty, pearly effect. The vantage point was great, too: it isn't often you can get such a good view from, in effect, mid-river.



*Windsor from the meadows*

An obvious 'find' of a subject – how could you go wrong with Windsor Castle? But the more usual view is from the riverside. Here I was right back across Eton Meadow. The castle was almost in silhouette, contrasting with the brightest sunlight blazing off the cottage roof at the right.



*Wimbledon Common after the floods*

At first sight, not much of a subject, but when all the tree reflections were added at the very end it suddenly made sense. This was done on a block of Arches paper. All the white highlights are reserved, not masked out or painted over at the end, except for the few very tiny flecks of highlight in the darker tree.

## ASSESSING LIKELY COMPOSITIONS

Before committing yourself to a full-scale painting, it is vital to assess the subject for its composition and lighting, and you can do this the traditional way by making a quick sketch, no matter how rough, no matter what the medium – pencil, charcoal, ballpoint pen, a dab or two of paint if you have it handy; or squinting at it through a small cardboard frame; or these days, simply taking a few snaps on your phone or camera and reviewing them on screen.

The commonest problem, which you will run into even after years of experience, is biting off more than you can chew. You will almost inevitably do this, realising that you have done so – yet again! – about an hour into the painting. I say inevitably, because this is the way that we naturally perceive what is before us; we are aware of so much more than a small area, we scan a much wider field of view, we are programmed not to miss anything at all. And so, as painters, we tend to embark upon hopelessly ambitious works in an attempt to record too much. It takes a lot of practice to train yourself out of this way of thinking, either becoming accustomed to focus upon some small part of the big scene, or else to develop broad painterly ways of summarising large areas so you do not get bogged down in time-consuming detail.

The following headings constitute just a few themes and ideas for subject matter drawn from my own experience and the kind of areas I usually like to paint in. More ideas are to be found throughout this book. But you will have your own environment, your own favourite subjects, your own territory. You may particularly love trees, flowers, clouds; dogs, horses, crowds of people, sports; beaches, mountains, farmland; cars, railways, bikes – where does the list end? It will take you wherever you want. Simply pack your kit, aim for your target, and get out there. You never know what you will find.

## SUNSHINE AND SHADOWS

The effects of sun and shadow are always beguiling, but they are transient and you have to work fast; I will have more to say about this in [Chapter 7](#). But just *as subjects*, the effects of the light are wonderfully tempting. As photographers know very well, the best times to see the maximum depth of colour and contrast are the so-called ‘magic hours’ at either end of the day, shortly after the sun rises and shortly before it sets. The richness and pattern of deep shadow areas towards evening, especially, make a great subject. But even during the day, sun and shadow patterns can transform what you would otherwise think of as mundane subjects. If the light is very changeable, switching between cloud to sunshine, it’s a good idea to make at least one focus of your painting a very dark area, as this will change much less than a sunlit area.



*Hammersmith Mall, evening*

One of those gorgeous transient effects of late afternoon light as the sun came out after rain. It was possible to block in large areas of dark colour very broadly, relying on the indication of sunlight on the tall building at the left, and the embankment at the right, as well as the profile of roofs and chimney-pot, to make the whole scene 'read' properly.



*Faversham old mill*

The upper loading shed on the mill provided an extremely dark note to counterpoint the brilliance of this late summer sky. In order not to detract from this focal point, which includes the lofty mast of the Thames barge, I had to be careful to downplay the distant background at the right, barely suggesting trees and other boats.



*Barnes railway bridge*

A classic instance of shadow patterns really making the interest in the image. Without the interesting diagonals created by the shadows, this composition would just be a series of parallel bands – trees, buildings, embankment wall, river – running across the painting.



### *Queenborough Quay*

In the morning I had been working on an acrylic painting. Having taken the car, for once, it was no trouble to carry two sets of paints, brushes and boards, and I was originally planning to use acrylic for this too. Indeed, I put an acrylic board on the easel at first. But the luminosity of the water and the soft colours in the sky called out for watercolour.



### *Suhaili* in refit, Portchester

I had discovered that Robin Knox-Johnston's legendary worldcircling yacht *Suhaili* was refitting at Portchester, so I made contact with the great sailor and he very kindly invited me down to paint her. Just another old boat to the uninformed eye, but I was totally awestruck, as you are when you encounter a legend, especially when I was invited up on deck.



*A working shipyard, Mystic*

A boatyard in the USA, but wooden boatbuilding is much the same anywhere – delicious piles of junk and mysterious pieces of machinery. At this time, I was using pen and watercolour a lot, as is evident in most of the drawing here. The distant passing catboat really did happen; as it sailed slowly by, I registered it in a few seconds.

## BOATS AND WATERSIDE

One of my favourite subjects because there can be so much to them: the calm reflecting waters, the interesting luminosities that occur, the scruffy and very human boatyards, the forms of boats and ships, the stories that you hear. It isn't often that you expect marine subjects to offer you oranges and dark purples instead of blues and greens, but they are there if you search about; for example, when you can find boats or ships out of the water in dock. But if you're going to venture into boatyards, always ask permission first and, if that is given, ask about what's happening that day, and pay attention. There may be boat or crane movements, or – as once happened to me – they might start spraying paint nearby. The workman doing the

spraying will have an industrial mask, but you probably won't. In general, in such a place, you're there at your own risk. As someone once put it to me: 'Mind the edge of the dock. The water isn't deep, but the mud is.'



*Sandblasting the J J Prior, Maylandsea*

One of those opportunities to include dark, strong colours in a marine subject. This venerable hull was being sandblasted. I remember the day mainly for trying to keep out of the way of the flying grit, and for subsequently losing the vital top fitting of my telescopic easel, without which it became practically useless.



*Strand on the Green from the railway bridge*

This, from my notes, was an 'extremely grey day, heavy overcast' and a fairly large rat passed by me a couple of times. The light lifted just a little later on, providing the impulse to try this composition. I couldn't rely on the light, but I could rely on the shadow for a focal point, so I punched in the background tree as dark as I could.



*Aylesford Bridge*

A self-consciously pretty English scene, alas, but it is difficult to do much else with Aylesford bridge, a scene that cannot have changed very much in 500 years. The bridge itself was interesting to paint, blocking in broad areas of shadow, then just picking out a few areas of detailed stonework to suggest all the rest of it.



*The churchyard path, Marlow*

It was May, and there was a wonderful Judas tree in blossom. I was torn between including more of this or including more of the shadowed area at the right, so the eye tends to wander around this composition. The distant figure anchors this movement to some extent.



*The Tudor gatehouse, Richmond*

I am a great admirer of Ernest Haslehurst, a very fine watercolourist who illustrated a great many English travel books in the early twentieth century, some of which I have. I do not usually work in his style but, for once, this piece is very evocative of both his subject matter and his technique.

## TRADITIONAL SUBJECTS

I called this section ‘traditional subjects’ because I really couldn’t think of another name. You probably all know what I mean, though – these subjects are what were once called ‘picturesque’, as a term of appreciation rather than contempt, and though we scarcely dare use that despised word anymore, the recognition of such subjects still calls to something in most of us and still tempts the painter. It’s the old pub, the Tudor gateway, the venerable church tower, the cosy group of cottages; terribly tempting to paint, and terribly difficult not to make too sweet, too pretty. Like a bit of chocolate, you think: well, just once in a while, where’s the harm in that? As long as you promise yourself to make up for it next time by painting the graffiti-spattered hoardings next to a shiny new skyscraper.

## **THE URBAN SCENE**

With that thought, we move to the contemporary urban scene. Some artists really enjoy getting their teeth into this world: the grittiness, the concrete, the harsh architecture, the fantastic contrast between grimy railway arches at ground level and the glittering glass towers floating high above them. The urban scene offers a range of subjects that can be very rewarding, but to my mind you have to be able to draw well in order to express the rigour and ‘bite’ which they seem to demand; no vague waffling will do here. If you’re not enthused by what may seem to be just boring towers of glass during the day, try going to look at them in the early morning or late afternoon; the low intense light can transform them into extraordinary canyons of colour-saturated shadows and blazing highlights. Then when dusk falls, they also make great subjects, as all the lights start to come on.



*Old church, Wapping*

A traditional kind of subject in a contemporary setting, and the style is also less traditional. At the time I was using a lot of pen and line work for architectural subjects such as these, providing a very good way of dealing with the regular inset stonework at the tower corners.

## UNEXPECTED DELIGHTS

Unexpected delights are just that, subjects that are a gift. You don't go looking for these, nor will you find them; some days they just happen. But they happen because there you are, outdoors, maybe with your easel all set up and your paints at the ready; you turn around, and there it is, the unexpected. Had you not gone to all that trouble, being outdoors, at the ready, you would never have had that opportunity. Belonging to this category also is the very unpromising scene where, nevertheless, you discern a little something, a little angle of the subject or a gleam of light, and from that you succeed in conjuring up something out of nothing. These are often the best delights of all.



*Towards Cannon Street*

Another example of how well watercolour is able to cope with the different textures of the contemporary scene, from glass to concrete to foliage, together with the final punctuation notes of the lamp standards against the sky. This kind of final precise detailing is difficult to do in an oil painting, where the paint remains entirely wet throughout.



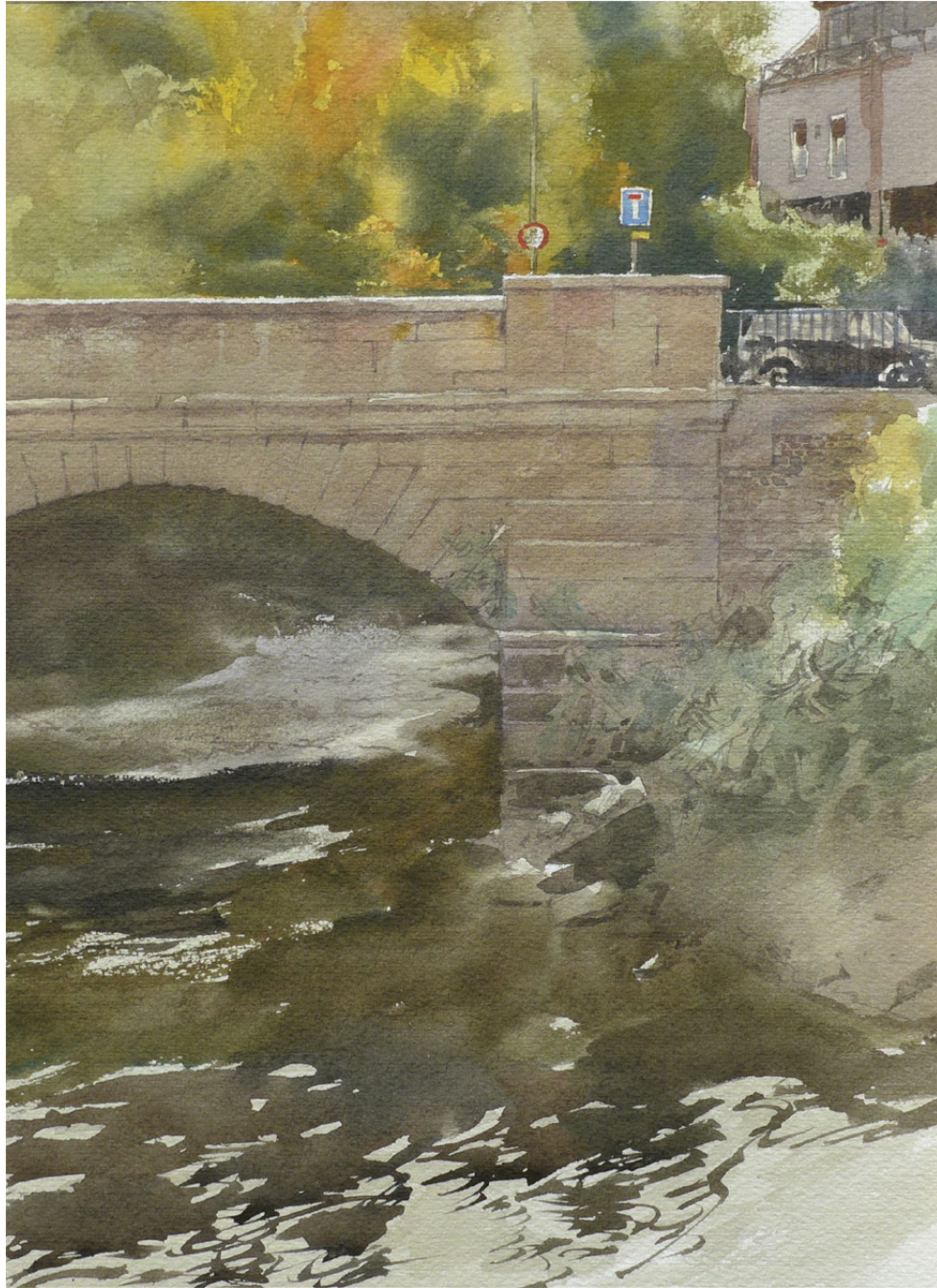
*Gasometer Park, King's Cross*

The modern urban landscape seems to be constantly changing, and here I was confronted with a major building development in the middle distance. There were two prominent tower cranes, but I thought that for my purpose one would be plenty. This was one case where I added the lattice-work of the crane's tower at the end with white paint; to attempt anything else would have been crazy.



*By the 'Prospect of Whitby'*

One of the unexpected delights. I had been painting with the Wapping Group around Shadwell, but the pub we were intending to visit was the famous old *Prospect of Whitby*, where I stumbled across this little view, which actually shows the river mooring belonging to the pub itself. The vertical ladder must present something of a challenge to a jolly sailor at the end of a convivial evening, hence perhaps the lifebuoy.



*The arch over Isleworth creek*

I had just finished painting a rather impressionistic piece, *Pastel colours, Isleworth* (see [Chapter 4](#)) when, as I started packing up to go, I saw this little scene in the opposite direction. It had something – to this day I can't say exactly why I like it – but since my painting kit was already set out, I had nothing to lose and so I painted it.

One last thing: I strongly recommend that you keep a logbook or notebook of your painting expeditions to record what you did each day. No need to carry it with you, unless you like to scribble such entries on your

sketchbook pages anyway, but do write it up at the end of the day before you forget. It doesn't have to be enormously wordy if you don't want it to be; just jot down what subjects you painted, what sizes, what papers, maybe a note about the weather or any difficulties. You will find this an interesting and useful record as time goes by and you want to check things.



*River Brent*

An intriguing corner just where an inlet (the river Brent) joins the Thames. The diagonals of the barges are strongly offset by the equally strong vertical of the barrage wall, and the loosely stated dark foliage in the top right quadrant nicely balances the bright illumination in the lower left.



### *An unexpected beach, Barnes*

The very busy Barnes road runs right alongside the river at this point, but is flanked by a flood wall, and if you only drive by you would scarcely guess that, at low tide anyway, a scene so rural lies just on the other side of the wall.

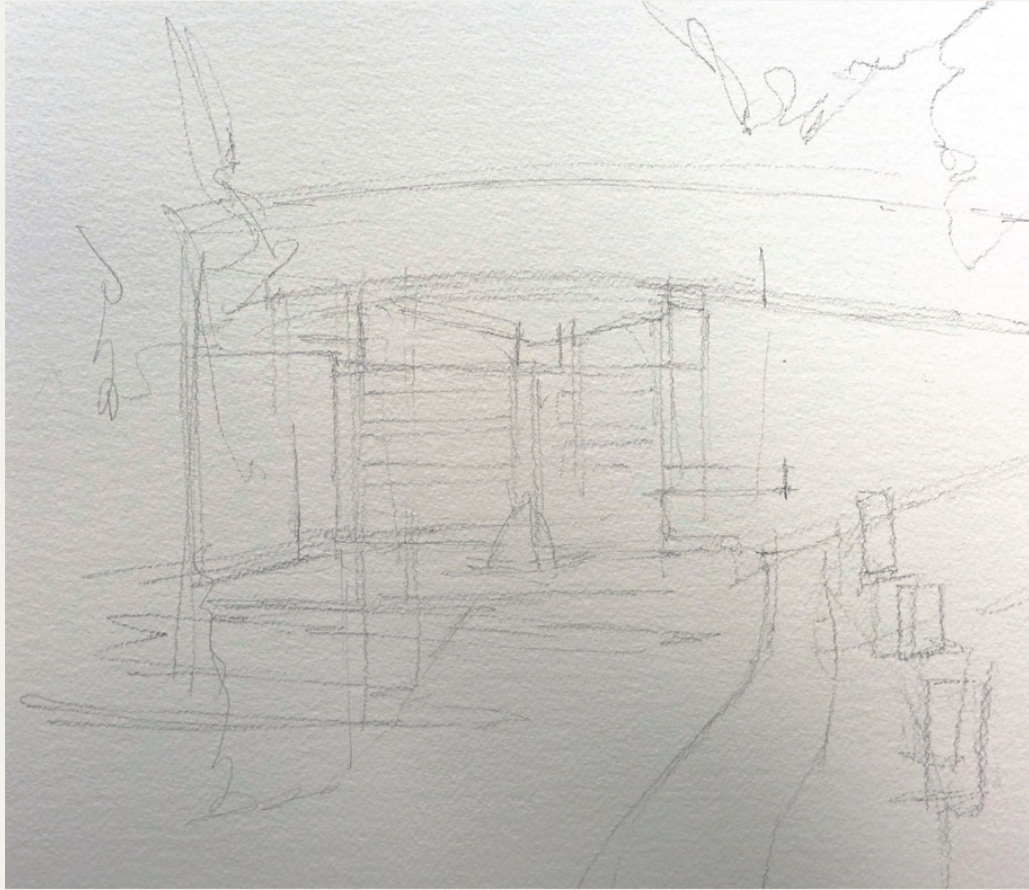
## STEP BY STEP: MILLMEAD LOCK

This was a tranquil scene just below what I thought was a peaceful lock and I did not realise how busy it could be, first of all with canoeists (it turned out that my location, just where the quayside dipped down conveniently low to the canal, also happened to be the only place where they could lift their boats out); then when I experienced the maritime equivalent, so familiar to urban painters, of the white van being parked next to you, when a canal boat moored right by me. I took his stern line, smartly whipped a turn around the quay bollard and dropped a neat hitch over his boat's bollard while he was busy at the other end, for which I really think he could have thanked me more than he did. However, all this occurred far into the painting. When I arrived, I saw a lock gate, a peaceful canal, a footbridge, masses of foliage, and my only worry was whether the sunshine would hold or whether it would cloud over. What I did not anticipate was that, early on, a boat would pass through the lock and leave the gates

open, changing the whole aspect of my initial view. I carried on, assuming that another boat would eventually reset the gates, as indeed one finally did.



This shows just how close that canal boat was to me. The photo shows a spell of sunshine, but there were spells of passing cloud too, amounting to roughly fifty-fifty during the course of painting.



### **Step 1, pencil drawing**

The view was basically one of simple shapes and blocks of light and shade, the principal lights being the sunlit edge of the lock wall and the grassy slope slanting down at the right. I just had to make sure in the drawing that these shapes were all clear and that the curve of the footbridge looked right.



### **Step 2, first wash**

I stated the blocks of light and shade with a pale wash and a fairly dark green-grey, but left white paper here and there, mainly the lock wall and the little fountain of water escaping between the closed lock gates. I wanted to establish the deep dark of the lock gates even at this stage, so quickly dipped in to a mix of ultramarine with dark brown.



### **Step 3, first development**

I had left the footbridge wall alone in the first wash because I wanted to retain some brightness in the brick colours, but now painted this in, graded across into the shadow. All the paper seemed to be staying quite damp, even though it was a warm afternoon, so it was easy to lift out the vertical highlight at the left, together with its reflection.



#### **Step 4, second development**

I now spent some time on the canal with its bands of bluish tree shadows across the water and the very deep contrast outlining the stone quayside. By this time the lock gates had been open for quite a while but now they closed again, as they had been at the start, and I could start to paint the detail in these. Another figure makes its appearance at the right.



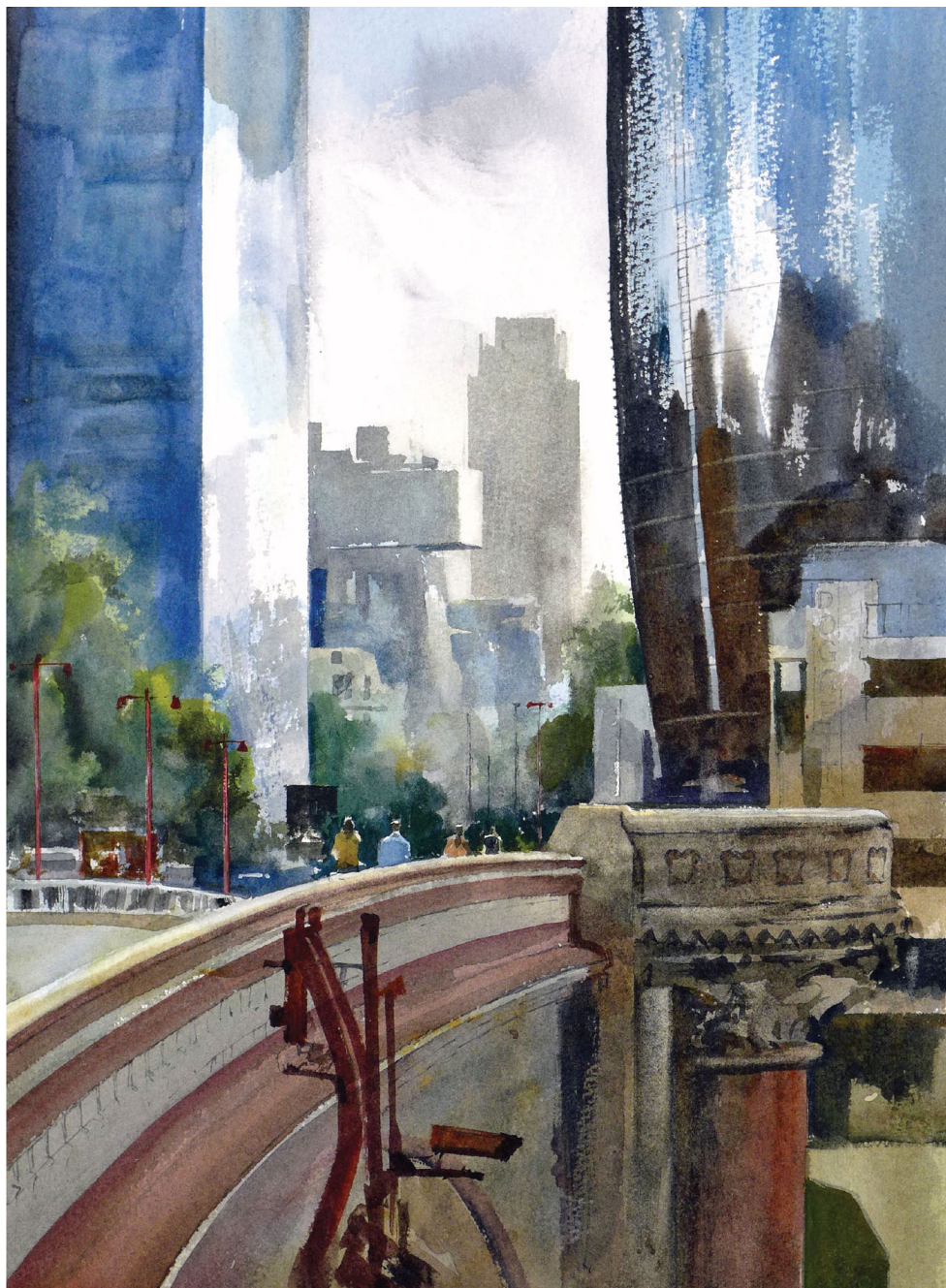
### **Step 5, to finish**

I was almost done with the bottom two-thirds of the picture but still had to confront some tricky issues in the top third – a mass of dark trees. This had the potential to become a murky green mess, so I kept it light and understated, making the distant trees more atmospheric. Finally, I reconsidered the shadows on the grassy bank at the right and added the footbridge railings.

## CHAPTER 4

### TECHNIQUES

As far as painting outdoors is concerned, the *oil* painting technique is a fairly straightforward one. Lots of oil painting techniques exist, of course, but most of these are confined to the studio and you don't have to worry about them outdoors. The simplicity of oils also means that you can build up to a finished result faster than with watercolour, which seems counter-intuitive, given that some watercolour tricks – laying a wash across a sky area, for example – are as quick as thinking. But watercolour is not as straightforward as oil, and even outdoors you will need to have several techniques up your sleeve to achieve a desired result.



*Glass reflections, Blackfriars*

This was a very complex painting with much to see, and I attempted far too much of it, but it is of interest for the various techniques used to tackle the wide range of things – buildings, glass, stonework, trees – that are possible with watercolour.

There are other, better books than this which will show you all the studio watercolour techniques, of which there are many. I am no expert on these, but I do know something about the practice of painting watercolour outdoors, having learned the hard way. This book contains work which was

done over a period of ten years or more, during which time I explored different ways of using watercolour outdoors, so you will discover various styles throughout its pages. I often find it necessary to use a number of techniques even in a single work to achieve any kind of strong, impactful result in the time available. For me, that is a goal, and a part of this is that strong drawing is important, no matter what the overlying style. For you, it may not be. You may be interested in other qualities, other objectives in the medium. You may not be searching for drama, but for luminosity, or delicacy, or perhaps yet more precision in the drawing. It is all possible with watercolour, this wonderfully versatile medium.

## **START WITH THE RIGHT PAPER**

Before looking at techniques, a word about paper. You can paint in oils on practically any surface but with watercolour, the paper is the be-all and end-all. Good paper can stand almost any amount of abuse, any application of technique, where you are doomed to failure and huge disappointment if you attempt it on lesser paper. So buy the best you can afford, and buy it in sheets. That way, when you cut it to the modest sizes you are likely to use outdoors, it may not seem quite so expensive. All the paintings in this book were done using the best papers, for example Arches, Fabriano, Saunders Waterford, Bockingford and others. They have slightly different characteristics, which it is best you find out for yourself; everyone has their own favourite among these, and your favourite is likely to differ not just from paper to paper but, as you get accustomed to using them, from time to time. All these papers and others are made in, usually, one of three different surfaces: Rough, NOT (meaning not pressed) or HP (meaning hot pressed). These titles are self-explanatory, meaning that the feel to the touch and the appearance of the surface ranges from rough to very smooth. For most purposes, unsurprisingly, the ‘average’ surface, NOT, is the best to start with and generally rely on. But it is worth experimenting with all of these surfaces, not just once, but frequently revisiting them, as your experience grows and you want to try different things with the medium. The papers are also all available in a range of weights. I prefer the heavier 640gsm (300lb) weight because I am too lazy to bother with wetting and stretching the lighter weights, but those are a considerably less expensive option. As we saw in [Chapter 2](#), papers are also available as glued-edge blocks, and these

can be handy. You may find that these block papers, though the same surface and the same weight by the same manufacturer, seem to have somewhat different characteristics to the corresponding loose sheet papers.



*Misty morning, Isleworth*

This small painting (a 9 × 12in/23 × 30.5cm block of Arches Rough paper), although almost the first piece I did after I switched from oils to watercolour, quite well illustrates a number of techniques: wet in wet, leaving white highlights, overpainting hard detail in layers. In further exploring watercolour, it was some time before I returned to this style.



*From Gabriel's Wharf*

Actually, this was from *underneath* Gabriel's Wharf, since low tide enabled me to shelter there, for it was rather cold, with rain showers and drizzle about. Not the sort of weather to attempt a full-blooded wet watercolour painting, so this illustrates a quite different side to the medium: a carefully drawn line technique with some delicate colour washes.

## **‘WET IN WET’**

‘Wet in wet’ is a cousin to what your oil painting colleagues are doing, and for which their smart term is *alla prima*, which simply means that you are painting the work in one relatively short session so that the paint stays wet the whole time. Working in watercolour outdoors, especially in this country, this is sometimes not an option you choose, but one imposed upon you because conditions are so damp or humid, time is short, and the paper never really dries. But you can exploit this state to create and model soft transitions as long as you work with the paper and paint instead of against

them. You can gauge how damp the paper may be by very gently touching it with the heel of your hand – not your fingertips, which may be slightly greasy, imperceptibly to you, but enough to affect the way the watercolour wash settles. Sometimes the ‘wet in wet’ principle can produce interesting and unexpected results. The *Kew Bridge* example shown was done on an extremely wet day – pouring rain, in fact – and I found that the whole background stayed workable, almost like a wet oil painting. I could carry on wiping out or adding colour as long as I wished. You can produce something like these conditions, if you like them, by wetting the paper with a small handspray. The drawback of a very wet technique like this is that nothing ever dries enough to paint any hard detail (see [Chapter 7](#), *Autumn colours, Cannizaro Park*), but on this occasion it dried just enough to allow me to render the barge at the right.



#### *Under Kew Bridge*

The day of pouring rain described in the text. There were only four of us out painting that day, which was just as well, since under Kew Bridge no more than four could find space to shelter from the rain as well as having a little elbow room in which to work.

## WORKING IN LAYERS

Almost any watercolour painting starts out as a ‘wet in wet’ because that is how you lay the initial washes – in the sky, for example. This stage is at once the most fun and the most nerve-shredding. The advice for outdoor painters is the same as for a studio painter: make sure you have mixed up plenty of wash in enough pots, use big brushes, go for it and don’t try to fiddle. Take the painting board right off your easel and hold it level or slightly tilt it while you observe how the washes are settling, and don’t be afraid if something bad seems to have happened. Either you will be able to correct it later, or much more likely it will not be noticeable in the subsequent development of the painting (see the first stage of the step-by-step painting, *Embankment Station*, which closes this chapter). Given reasonable weather conditions, once this first really wet stage has dried sufficiently, you can start to build up the painting layer by layer. Some watercolour painters do a great deal of layering – one good friend, referring to such layers as ‘glazes’, claimed to build up scores of them – while others swear by using a maximum of two layers to retain the luminosity that they claim is lost with more layers. But either way, painting in layers simply involves you using your judgement, thinking before intervening with each layer to punch in the darkest notes, or develop the mid-tones, or better shape the drawing. This process is much clearer to see than to describe, and is hopefully apparent in my step-by-step demonstrations. If thoroughly engrossed in a painting, it is a very good idea to simply step away from it, look somewhere else, rest your eye for a while, take a break, and then come back to it for a fresh look.

## THE ‘SOFT’ TECHNIQUE

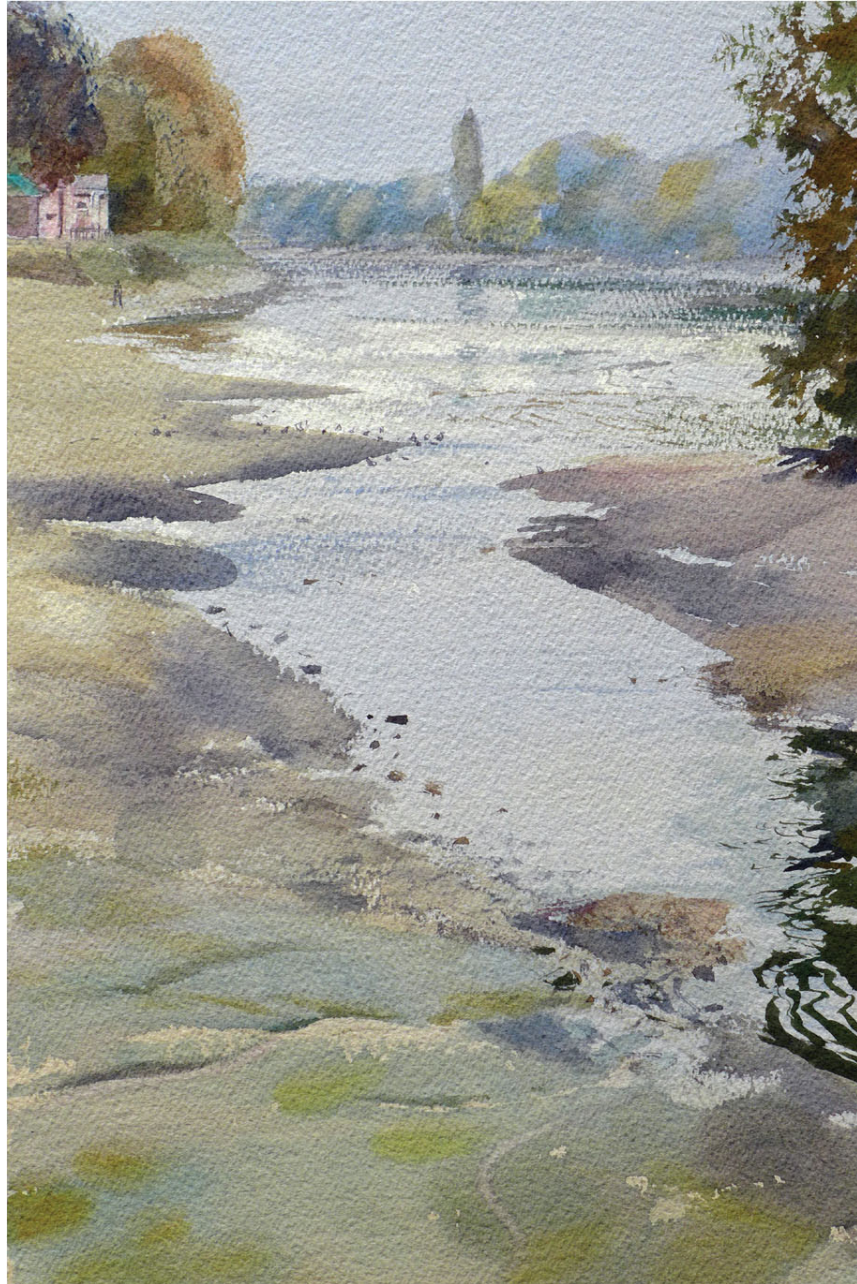
This group of paintings represents a traditional approach to watercolour – the painterly look, using a full range of tones, lots of soft gradation and not much in the way of heavily stated drawing (all of which incline me to call it a ‘soft’ technique). This treatment is very appropriate for subjects like these, especially involving studies of light and shade, and can produce delightful results. Some papers are better suited than others to produce this

soft kind of effect, although on checking back with my notebook, I see that in fact the three of these were all done on different papers and two different types of surface. Sometimes you can really apply the painterly approach as in *Pastel colours, Isleworth*, which was done without any preliminary drawing whatever.



### *In Smith Square*

A typical May day; freezing while painting on the riverbank during the morning, too hot on arriving in this sheltered square. However, the warmth allowed a 'layered' painting – the loose, wet background washes soon dried and I was able to work over them with increasingly fine detail. With stonework like this, you can get away with remarkably little drawing for the whole area to 'read' as a building.



*Pastel colours, Isleworth*

The ultimate in soft techniques in the sense that there was no preliminary drawing at all. I arrived to see a wonderful pearly light and, since I knew that this would change in no time, I simply struck directly in with some loose washes, attempting to register this glorious atmosphere. Once all this had dried somewhat, I added the background and surrounding trees.



*Boats at Marble Hill*

It was a delightful morning to be painting by the sunlit river and the painting reflects this; the subject is little more, or little less, than a sunlit day. The softness is partly contributed by the paper, Bockingford, which is not a paper I usually use, although it is a good one and very popular with many painters.



*Putney embankment, morning mood*

Another 'soft' painting with a very similar feel to the previous illustration, although this time the paper is Arches Rough and the picture involves much more drawing and composition. Note the little glinting highlights along the shore, produced simply by scuffing a loaded brush over the rough-surfaced paper – there is no prior masking or subsequent overpainting.



*Down to the sea, Stonington*

This painting was done on one of my many visits to Mystic Seaport, Connecticut. This pleasant local beach is just a walk down the road from Stonington lighthouse, past the nineteenth-century sea captains' houses (you can see a different treatment of this subject in [Chapter 7](#)).

## THE 'HARD' TECHNIQUE

I have called this the 'hard' technique simply to contrast it with the soft technique (these are only my terms, by the way), though 'hard' does not describe its difficulty, but the fact that it steps away from the gentler look of traditional watercolour and relies much more on strongly stated drawing, more compositional drama in the lights and darks, more contrast, or a more graphic treatment. Perhaps 'strong' would be a better word than 'hard'. In this case, rather than conveying the nuances of atmosphere and colour, you will be on the lookout for subjects which offer greater rigour, impact and structure. This is often desirable in itself when you are working outdoors

against the clock. I sometimes think of this as finding subjects with ‘strong bones’ – what is inherently durable about the image? For example, what will you be left with if the sun goes in? With this harder approach, you can go in various directions, but all of them depend on confident drawing.



*Ransome Dock, Battersea*

A painting that relied for its success on a fair grasp of drawing and perspective, dramatised by very strong darks – the available daylight was basically light grey, and little colour was visible. Note the suggestion of the lamp globes at the left – these were just lifted out of the wet paint.



*Boats for hire, Richmond*

More of a graphic or illustrative approach, again relying on structure and drawing, with colour and tonal areas represented very simply and a lot of white or near-white space left free.



*Stonington lighthouse*

Another painting from Mystic, this time illustrating a 'hard' technique. Stonington takes itself very seriously as it dates back to at least 1650, and is very proud of having beaten off an attack by Royal Navy warships during the War of 1812. I happened to be painting here on the exact 200th anniversary of this battle, but no one passing by on this delightful morning held me personally responsible.



*San Martino church, Portofino*

It was April, I was aboard ship, the weather was mostly cold and grey all week, so Portofino looked considerably less appealing than, say, Cornwall. I used Fabriano paper for this study, since a batch of my usual standby, Arches, did not seem to be behaving at all well.



*The village flower stall*

This is a much more impressionistic use of watercolour, but I include it within what I call the 'hard' technique because, although much of the painting is very loose, it depends firmly on very dark notes and definite drawing, especially in the umbrella and the figures, to pin down what's going on.

## INCORPORATING LINE WORK

A very useful addition to the watercolourist's armoury, and one not available in most other media, is to introduce line work within paintings in varying amounts, sometimes creating paintings which are basically accurate line drawings washed with colour; sometimes using a lot of line work in a painting because the more technical or linear nature of the subject demands it; and sometimes incorporating line work into a more conventional painting instead of, for example, using a very thin brush. In each case, I prefer to do this using not ink (the usual recourse for line work) but watercolour paint, when I can mix up whatever colour I like in a small pot and simply dip a

pen into it. I like to use an old fountain pen, but you can use any pen you get on with, or for that matter something like a cocktail stick. If I have nothing else ready to hand but I quickly want to make a particular sharp detail, I may simply stick a sharp pencil into a puddle of the paint I happen to have on my palette. Anything that does the job. This kind of line work, being watercolour itself, fits comfortably into the rest of the painting and can be further manipulated in the same way, lifted out or overpainted or scratched out. It is well worth experimenting with line work, which can be absorbing and fun.



*The dome, Brompton Oratory*

From the outset I decided to treat this subject as line and wash, which meant a lot of line drawing. Becoming impatient with this after a while, I mixed up a strong blue wash for the sky and another for the stonework, swabbing these fairly freely over the drawing. Once this was dry, I picked up the pen again and worked in some more line.



*The London Apprentice*

Again, essentially a line and wash study. With watercolour it is all too easy to make the colour and tone on sunlit roofs and brickwork over-heavy – it is best to skip a brush very lightly over these areas, just catching the paper, then leave them alone.



*A disappearing waterfront, Woolwich*

This kind of industrial scene is vanishing rapidly from London as the riverside apartment blocks advance everywhere. Instead of being a line and wash painting, this time the emphasis is the other way round – more of a watercolour painting, with line work added afterwards as the only practical way of dealing with all the highly intricate steelwork visible.



*The house in the willows*

Finally in this section comes a painting where the line work is so closely integrated with the painting that the viewer is scarcely aware that line has been used at all. But it is there – in the walls and the roofs, of course, but also quite a lot in the willow tree, where I dipped a pen into a green mix.

## LIFTING OUT

Once your watercolour washes are down on the paper, that is not necessarily the end of the story, since you can carry on working on and changing the ‘finished’ painting in various ways. With the right paper – and this does not work with all papers – ‘lifting out’ is a valuable technique, allowing a limited amount of intervention and remodelling in watercolour, rather like ragging out in oils. Basically, it consists of pressing and pulling a very damp brush (I often use the kind of quite hard, chisel-edge brush shown in [Chapter 2](#)) across a previously painted area, then lightly blotting

the place with a bit of tissue. It works best on an area that is painted fairly dark to begin with. But it is no good hoping that you will be able to get right back to white paper this way; there will always be some residual colour or staining in the paper you lift back to. This particularly will be the case if you happen to like using the synthetic colours, such as Prussian Blue or the quinacridones, since by their nature these are stains rather than pigments. If you want pure white, you'll need to work a bit harder.



*Detail 1, Greenwich sunset*

A small area of the painting reproduced in full in [Chapter 7](#). This part measures about 5in (12½cm) across and illustrates lifting out in both of the larger distant tower blocks. However, the bridge latticework was added with a little opaque white.



*Detail 2, Greenwich sunset*

A second detail from the same painting, done in a great hurry in quite damp conditions, so everything stayed fairly wet throughout. There is a lot of lifting out in this area – the highlit edges of the far distant tower and of the nearer ones, the two tiny gables in the centre, sections of the embankment walling, and shaping of the tree at centre left.

## WHITE AND BRIGHT HIGHLIGHTS

Something that – rightly – frightens people about watercolour, especially if they are accustomed to one of the opaque media – oils, acrylic or even pastels – is the thought that the white paper is the highest highlight you are ever going to have at your disposal in that painting. If you lose that, you have nowhere to go. There is little chance of overpainting in white or some other colour without losing the very qualities you chose watercolour for – the brilliance, the luminosity, the lack of laboured overpainting. With watercolour you have to start with the white paper and think backwards: what must you do, all the way through the painting, in order *not* to lose that brightest light? What must you do *not* to make a mistake? This awareness

of working towards an end result is particularly clear in watercolour, but of course in some sense it is true of any painting or indeed any other work of art whatever. Sculptors often say that your job is to reveal the image concealed in the stone.

Well, some words of reassurance. First, watercolour, if you are using a top-quality paper, is not quite as unforgiving as that. You can build up transparent layers without the paint becoming too laboured. Once you get to know the individual paints, you will realise that some of them are somewhat opaque and can be used rather like overpainting. And if you think you have over-coloured or over-toned an area you really wanted to be lighter, you can often compensate by thinking backwards again and adding a very strong dark note next to that light area, which will look brighter by comparison.

Second, there are ways to make sure of those white highlights. By far the best is, obviously, not to paint those areas at all in the first place. This works best when you have something glittering and reflective like glass or water to paint (a rarer case where something rather similar applies is in paintings of snow scenes). As early as possible in the painting, ‘scuff’ a brush loaded with the adjacent colour next to the desired highlight, aiming to just skip across the paper so that it hits and misses across the paper’s rough or slightly rough surface, giving a shimmer to the remaining white area. This is easier to see than to describe. Once you have done that, leave well alone! Then build the rest of the painting tonally around that brightest area. Another technique is to use masking fluid, as many artists do, thus reserving the spots and areas you wish to keep white. I dislike masking fluid because it commits me to an accurate drawing to begin with, making subsequent changes very difficult. I prefer to keep my painting options much more open once the paint starts flying about. Also, masking out is much better suited to studio work. Working quickly outdoors, you will find that the paper practically never becomes dry enough to allow you rub out the masking – if you try too soon, it will smear into a horrible mess.



*Glass reflections, Blackfriars, detail*

The glass of the tower at the right was painted very rapidly, relying on just catching the texture of the paper for the glittering effect. Once this was dry, it was possible to paint the fine detail indicating different floor levels; the lower ones are lifted out from the very dark background.



*St Mary's in the snow*

A lot of 'backwards' thinking is involved in snow scenes. The trickiest job in this painting was to plan ahead in order to leave clear the important snow-laden branch extending from the mid-left. Conditions were extremely damp throughout and to use masking fluid would have been quite impossible, even had I wanted to.



*Towards Molesey Lock, detail*

The central band of light across the water is left as pure white paper, indicated by skipping a brush loaded with light bluegrey across the paper. The full version of this painting can be seen in [Chapter 5](#).



*Tower at St Pancras Lock, detail*

The shadow side of the tower was punched in very dark although I worked it around the white vertical post. Once all of this was dry, I used the tip of a penknife to scratch out the wires and cables. The fine wire mesh in the fencing was added with a sharp pencil.



#### *St James's Park Lake*

Here, the fine detail of the sunlit leaves against the dark foliage at left could have been done successfully using masking fluid, had I been bothered to do it. Instead I let all the dark background washes dry properly before painting the leaves over with some highlights in white, tinted light yellow-green.

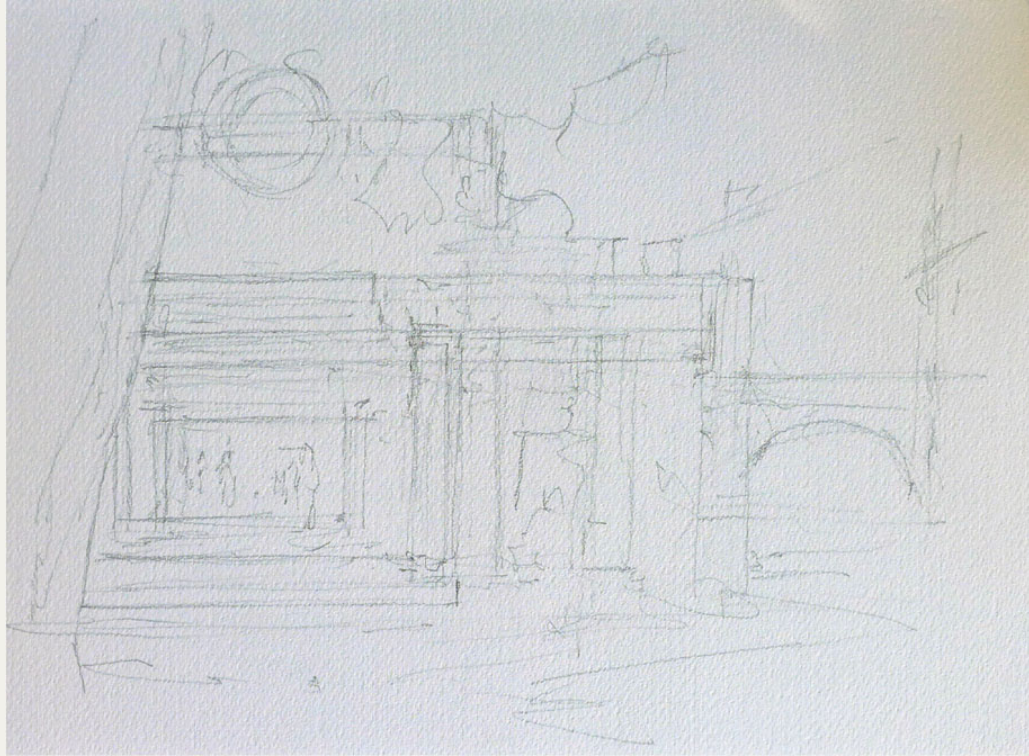
For those finishing touches, if at the end you really feel you must recover some white or bright highlights, you can scratch out very fine lines with a knife blade or else, as an absolute last resort, use a few tiny touches of gouache white – some artists prefer to use acrylic paint for this. Watercolour opaque white, the so-called ‘Chinese white’ is hardly worth considering for this purpose since it seems to have very little opacity. If you are going to use one of the opaque whites, do not let it get anywhere near your watercolour palette, paints or brushes. You will finish up with a milky, muddy mess. Use a separate small palette – anything will do, I often use the plastic top of a drinks cup – and a separate brush just for this purpose. If you want your highlights to show some colour instead of white you can use, once more, gouache or acrylic. But the paper must be properly dry for either scratching-out or opaque white highlighting to succeed.

## STEP BY STEP: EMBANKMENT STATION

I was originally attracted to this scene by the pattern of shadows falling on the interesting architectural detail to the right, and had indeed thought about working from that side of the road; but the more I looked at it from across the way, the more I was intrigued by the view through the tube station entrance to the brightly lit street beyond. However, the opportunity here was also the problem, because I was facing across the Embankment, a very busy road where I knew that the view would frequently be obscured by clogged stationary traffic, much of it consisting of large trucks and buses. This working spot would have been practically impossible a few years ago, but today the immediate foreground road is now a cycle lane, offering a decent separation from the heavy traffic, while the trees and the river at my back provided both shade and fresh air. Looking now at the photograph, this scene appears hideously cluttered with street furniture, but as is so often the case, I was simply not aware of much of this at the time – I just did not 'see' it. Compositionally, having squinted at a couple of snaps, the only question was how much of the right side I wanted to include (too much, as usual).



One of my snaps taken for compositional reference, before deciding on the exact view.



### **Step 1, pencil drawing**

As usual, quite a lot of the decisions took place before I ever lifted a pencil. I just had to be careful with the proportions of the height and width of the tube station to leave enough room on the paper to fit in the Underground logo at the top as well as the interesting arch at the right which echoed the logo.



### **Step 2, first wash**

There was a general air of sunny warmth about much of the colouring, so I mixed a warm yellowish wash and quite a dark shadow wash for the main elements, but reserved a couple of patches of clear white paper for the view through the station and in the sky above, although much of that would eventually be obscured by foliage.



### **Step 3, development**

I was anxious to avoid going too green, a pitfall which I often fall into, so for the most part the only yellow I allowed myself was a light raw sienna, making my greens from this and ultramarine. For a lot of the architectural detail I simply dipped back into the little pot of purple or mauve-brown wash I had mixed up for the first wash. I devoted quite a lot of time to the fine detail of the view through the entrance and the steps leading to it, since if this was right, much of the rest could stay loose. I worked to register real people's poses as they appeared momentarily, rather than painting generic figures.



#### **Step 4, finishing**

I carried on with the detail work, slicking in the Underground logo and the station nameboard. I was originally intending to letter this nameboard accurately with tinted white paint, so that the words were readable, but it seemed quite happy as it was. Finally, I decided that the painting needed more contrast, so I re-mixed the shadow wash and darkened the purplish shadow areas. I did wonder whether to punch in a set of the traffic lights (though all the time I never did 'see' the huge grey post that was front and centre), but decided against it.

## CHAPTER 5

### COPING WITH THE WEATHER

**W**hen working outdoors, no matter where in the world you may be, you will have to be equipped, mentally and physically, to cope with the local conditions. These vary from place to place, and every outdoor painter around the world gets to know what is right for them once they step out of their front door. The United Kingdom, though it doesn't often suffer the sort of extreme conditions known elsewhere, is one of those places where a lot of different weather conditions may happen on the same day, or even in the same two hours. It can be difficult to predict what any one day might be like, and therefore what you need to take to be able to function properly. But then you come up against the weight problem. Unless you are travelling by car and painting only a short distance away from it, you can't carry everything you might possibly need. You must take the best guess you can for the day's weather and make your choices accordingly. All this is so for oil painting or any other medium, but more so for watercolour.



*St Mark's in the rain*

This Venetian subject, wet pavement and all, is a favourite with painters. My own tribute to this was a sketchbook treatment on a small block of paper using a tiny paintbox, since, on that morning, I had no other equipment of any kind with me.

Rather as with golfers and anglers, you can rely upon just about any weather condition to be disadvantageous and so provide you with ample excuse for failing to come home with a masterpiece. It can be too windy, too wet, too sunny or not sunny enough, too dusty; with watercolour the air

itself can easily be too damp or too dry; then again, there's your own comfort. You may be too cold, too hot, or in too much of a draught. Or you may be plagued by flies or wasps. Let's consider a few of these conditions one by one.

## THE FULL SUN

Painting outdoors on a blazing hot day may seem like a really good idea. That's certainly how I feel when the early morning sun comes streaming through the window – I want to pack the painting kit, quick, and get out there! But there are quite serious problems out in the sun. One is simply physical exposure: you don't want to be out in the full sun for too long, no matter how good your hat. Another is the medium: watercolour washes will probably, for once, dry too fast for good handling – you are more likely to get undesirable drying marks. Then there's the very brilliance of that sun – you need to keep your paper out of direct sunlight (and the same if you choose oils or acrylics), or you will be dazzled. A similar consideration, in high summer, is that what may be in your focus of view is an extreme contrast between brilliant sunlit areas and correspondingly profound shadows, which can be tiring and headache-inducing if you let it. As I mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), I always carry a small, light-coloured umbrella. On sunny days it serves as a parasol, but it isn't practical to hold for very long periods with one hand while you're using the other hand to paint. You can buy art umbrellas for this purpose, about the size of golf umbrellas, but these are too big, heavy and unwieldy for the outdoor painter anywhere except in your back garden. I did take one out with me once; and once was enough. As so often when working outdoors, one of your priorities is finding shelter of one kind or another, and this time it will be shade you're seeking out.



*The South Bank on the hottest day of the year*

I seriously wondered whether it could possibly be worth going out this day. The prospect seemed particularly unappealing – London's South Bank, acres of blistering concrete. But luckily the day produced a rather nice beach at low tide, and some excellent shade under an embankment overhang.



*The old coach house*

A blazing hot day, far too hot to stand out in the direct sun for even a short time. Fortunately, there was a conveniently placed tree casting a great, deep pool of shadow, so there I painted. I was standing on grass, and this seemed to provide a microclimate of slightly damp air, which was helpful in keeping the washes from drying too fast.



*The V&A: a painting abandoned*

A classic case of picking the wrong spot to stand. I liked this busy view of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and set up in the shade of a plane tree. But this afforded little shade, and anyway the sun shortly worked its way around and fell full on my paper. From then on, I was completely dazzled but struggled on for some time before abandoning this piece as a lost cause.



*Landing stages at Eton*

Having spent most of a hot summer's day painting in the shade, I was crossing back over the bridge from Windsor when I saw this scene. It was late in the afternoon and less scorching, so now I felt comfortable enough to paint out in the open. Sometimes you just have to wait for the right time of day.

**IN THE WET**

You may certainly go watercolour painting outdoors on a rainy day, but you'll have to be prepared to get your easel (and yourself) under cover somewhere. This is where cities are so handy, what with their bridges and arches and overhangs where you can often get some shelter. If you're out in the countryside, shelter is much more difficult to find, and it doesn't take rain any time at all to find its way through tree canopies. But if you have found shelter, wet days can offer very interesting things to the artist – great sheets of reflective wet paving in the city, big puddles and winding rivulets in the country, all of them bringing the light of the sky down to the dark earth with fascinating shards, shapes and reflections. Then, if you can only wait long enough, cloud will often start to clear right at the very end of the afternoon and the low evening light strikes through in glory.



*Fishing flags, Hastings beach*

This was all painted out in the rain, which was possible only because at Hastings sizeable fishing boats are still hauled up on the beach, and some of them have catamaran hulls. There is standing headroom under the crossdeck of a catamaran, and tucked well under one of these, I was near enough out of the rain, give or take a few splotches.



*A passing shower over the Embarkadero*

A somewhat more ambitious Venetian piece, since this time I had an easel and some more kit, with a 9 × 12in (23 × 30.5cm) paper and board. I was wedged in to what you might call a half-sheltered architectural recess and was almost finished when a light shower blew in sideways and marked the upper left sky with 'measles' – the interesting little blotches that raindrops produce on a watercolour.



### *Snack Bar Colleoni*

Yet another rainy day in Venice. It was pouring with rain at the Campo San Zanipolo, but I found an unexpected place to shelter tucked underneath the (empty) sarcophagus of Melchiori Zeno. This gave me a fine view of the statue of Bartolomeo Colleoni, as well as the encouraging sight of the Snack Bar Colleoni across the square.



### *Tragheto Santa Sofia*

Later in the same day as the previous painting, after I was somewhat revived with hot coffee. It was still raining, but since this was Sunday there was no business going on at the famous fish market next to the Rialto, so this gave very good shelter as well as affording a fine view across the Grand Canal to the *traghetto* landing stage.

## WINDY DAYS

I often think that when working outdoors the wind is the worst problem of all. If it's strong enough, or gusting unpredictably, it creates obvious difficulties – at worst your easel may blow over, so you'll have to find something handy to tie it to. If nothing else offers, tying it down to the straps of your painting bag will usually do. While working, your painting board will be buffeted uncomfortably to and fro. Your brushes will be blown to the ground again and again. If you're relying on finding a sheltered spot well out of the wind, and from which there also happens to be

a view, that search may take long time. If there's light rain about as well, the wind is certain to blow the rain sideways into wherever you'd congratulated yourself on finding. It'll be draughty, mostly from one direction, so take care of your weather ear or you will finish up with earache. The wind can be, basically, really annoying. And it's very difficult to get away from.



*The 'Ida' at Maylandsea*

Paintings can convey a visual impression of a day to the viewer but, as an outdoor painter, only you will know the full context of your experience. This was one of those extremely windy days and the boatyard was quite exposed, other artists' easels being merrily blown over all around. I found a sheltered spot in the angle of two shipping containers, but like many such spots, it soon proved to smell less than pleasant.

## OVERCAST DAYS

There can be an awful lot of days like this when you're painting outdoors in Britain – you know, dull, maybe a chance of drizzle, or the sun might come

out for half an hour; more likely the light is as flat as a pancake and the overall colour ranges from light grey to slightly darker grey. But this is the day you had planned to go painting, so there you are, outdoors. A shame it wasn't yesterday when the sun was so inviting, or tomorrow when it will, of course, be shining again; no, you're stuck with today, and you're going to have to work just that bit harder to get a result. On the other hand, you do have a good excuse for not producing a masterpiece, and that takes the pressure off your own frame of mind. You don't set out with any very high hopes, and often enough you may be pleasantly surprised by what you can salvage from such a day – the unchanging, even light gives you the chance to work at a steadier and more considered pace than when you are racing to record some transient effect of sun and shadow.



#### *Towards Molesey Lock*

An overcast day, which gave a lot of time to work in the mostly unchanging light. I was very attracted to this scene for personal reasons: the viewpoint almost seems to be from mid-river, calm water, quiet dull weather, as if you are hanging about in a boat waiting for that lock to open, which I have done hundreds of times in voyages through the canals and rivers of France and England.



*The 'Star' of Noank*

England is not alone in enjoying dull weather with a chance of rain. This was at Mystic Seaport, Connecticut. Certainly there was rain impending, but this was not what finally stopped me; instead, I felt that I had really said all I wanted to say about the scene.



### *Rising tide at Putney*

People often overlook the fact that rivers have tidal stretches too. A friend took this picture of me years ago, when I was still painting in oils. I was feeling smug because I had guessed, correctly, that the high tide would only just reach the blue post. But I had reckoned without a large riverboat which then went by, pushing up waves of wash.

## THE TIDE

Just one more thing to take into account, if you're planning to paint beside a tideway. It's best to aim for about an hour either side of low water or high water (giving you two hours in all), since at other times the tide runs a lot more strongly so there will be more extreme changes in what you see.

## THE SEASONS

For the outdoor painter, as far as the weather goes, just about any time in the year can offer a good day or a bad day. Good days present special opportunities throughout all the seasons – the deep colours revealed in

leafless winter, for example, or the dewy early morning brilliance of high summer – just as bad days can occur equally in July or November. The moral is to be ready, either way: have a properly equipped painting bag or, at the very least, a sketchbook always handy to grab quickly if it's good, and have an alternative in mind for a long-planned outing if it turns out to be bad.



#### *Northumberland Avenue*

An ideal location for a sketchbook, just on the corner of Trafalgar Square where you could not get away with using an easel. I closed this sketchbook while the paint was still wet – it was March, so the drying conditions were not ideal – hence the area of torn paper visible on the lower centreline.



*Wimbledon Common birch trees and gorse*

Sometimes the simplest of techniques can work well. An early small watercolour of mine, and done without the full bag of equipment I was later to use, it is simply a rapid direct sketch to rejoice in the springtime. The background is painted around the white birch trees.



### *The V&A in March*

This is the companion piece to *Brompton Road* in [Chapter 1](#), but this time I chose a different angle to portray more of the Victoria and Albert Museum itself. The architectural detail is very complex and I did not attempt to transcribe some of it absolutely accurately – the number of terracotta stripes might not stand up to counting, for example.

## **SPRING**

Early spring is a good time to be out painting – you are feeling optimistic, the light is getting much brighter, the days are longer and the weather can be just right for comfort; the trees have not yet come into full leaf, so you still have all the benefits of winter, seeing the structure of trees’ canopies and the colours in their bark – no need yet to start worrying about how you are going to cope with the massed greens of summer. When winter turns into spring, your sketchbook has a chance to come into its own – the weather may still be too cold and uncertain to commit to full-size paintings, while the colours are still on the subdued side, which seems so favourable to sketchbook work.

## **SUMMER**

If you are out in the country or by the river you will certainly be dealing with lots of greens. Some artists revel in them, of course, and rejoice in playing off the contrasts with complementary colours. Sometimes all that green can seem a bit overwhelming – vivid greens here, dark greens there, distant greens, leaf greens right next to you, but all of them green. I rely on my standby ‘ish’ colours here – ‘greenish’, in this case, just swinging the various mixes I can see on my palette towards green, but mostly avoiding tube greens or the zingier mixing paints – phthalo or prussian blues, for example – in my mixes. If you want to get away from facing all the greens out in the full sun, aim to find a bit of deep shade. From this cover, you should be able to enjoy fine effects of sunlight filtering through the leaf canopy.



*Across Denbies Vineyard*

High summer brings the multitude of greens and strong contrasts between brilliant light areas and profound darks. Though this vineyard is, naturally, very open, there was a big oak tree where I found shade for my easel. This pleasant spot, as it turned out, was also the home to a nest of some kind of bees or wasps, whose inhabitants were constantly buzzing about me, but otherwise no real bother.



*The Mediterranean Garden, Kew*

After painting in Denbies Vineyard during the morning, I was keen on finding some real shade so in the afternoon I went to Kew Gardens, where I found this delightful spot, full of deep shade, with the bonus of a rich red colour in the soil under the pines and cork trees.



### *Autumn in the park*

If it is a good autumn, when the leaf colours are really strong and the sunlight is bright, the effect is almost too much to take in, still less attempt to paint. It is very easy, faced with such a scene, to get yourself bogged down in too much detail and to start painting umpteen leaves.

## AUTUMN

Autumn colours are a joy, of course, and the weather is often comfortable. The main problem for watercolour painting can be one of all-pervading dampness – there is a lot of humidity in the air, and you will find that your paper stays wet or damp for a long time; in fact, it is unlikely to dry sufficiently to allow techniques such as layering or line work. Late autumn, as it gradually grades down into winter, can bring some fine opportunities in town (see [Chapter 7](#)) to paint the lights glowing in dark buildings profiled against twilight skies.



*Autumn leaves, sketchbook page*

One way of dealing with the overabundant colour of autumn is to go minimal and take to your sketchbook instead. A page with a nicely placed study of a few leaves can express the spirit of autumn better than a whole painting filled from side to side with orange foliage.



*From Kingston Bridge, December*

Autumn turns back to winter again. The air is cold but can also be damp, compounded here by being over the river. The paper stayed very damp throughout, but this allowed all the soft handling in the far and middle distance, and fortunately I had enough sense to paint the background washes around the foreground boats, leaving white paper into which I could add the sharp detail at the end.

## WINTER

There can be delightful days for painting in autumn and winter when the light seems particularly crystalline and clear, though the hours are short and you will have to wrap up warm. But it can be worth the effort. Deep winter brings a welcome change from all that green foliage, for this is when bare trees and underbrush really show, literally, their true colours – when you can really rejoice in the rich browns and umbers and oranges of tree bark, and the intricate patterns the branches and twigs trace against the sky. A good time to try some of that line work!

When it snows, the light is often so different and so exciting that you can't wait to get out and experience it. A snow scene can be an oil painter's paradise – but is it sensible to even try this in watercolour? Well, unless you manage to find a viewpoint from within really good shelter, it can be physically difficult. If your gloves are good enough to keep you warm, they will probably be too thick for you to be able to handle slender watercolour brushes. Then, if it is really cold, your painting water can actually freeze – in your water pot, in your palettes, and on the painting itself (this creates intriguing mottling and crazing patterns in the freezing paint!). Painting snow scenes in watercolour brings an extra challenge, just like painting the blaze of sunlight on water (see [Chapter 7](#)), in that you have to concentrate really hard throughout the work if you are to retain the highest whites, yet not leave so much white paper that the illusion of snow is lost. Painting outdoors in these conditions is a rare experiment for most of us, and I take my hat off (briefly, because of the cold) to anyone who manages to do a lot of this.



*In Richmond Park*

A bright, crisp day in January, one of those days that has an early suggestion of spring about it, and the colours were wonderful to see, while the low afternoon sun also produced some welcome diagonal shadows. I just needed to keep a weather eye open for the deer, which were not that far away from me.



*Snow, Cannizaro Park*

For the watercolourist, painting outdoors in really cold snow conditions is more of a stunt than anything else, unless you can find some really good shelter. Here I was right out in the open and the painting clearly shows the 'frozen wash' effect mentioned in the text.



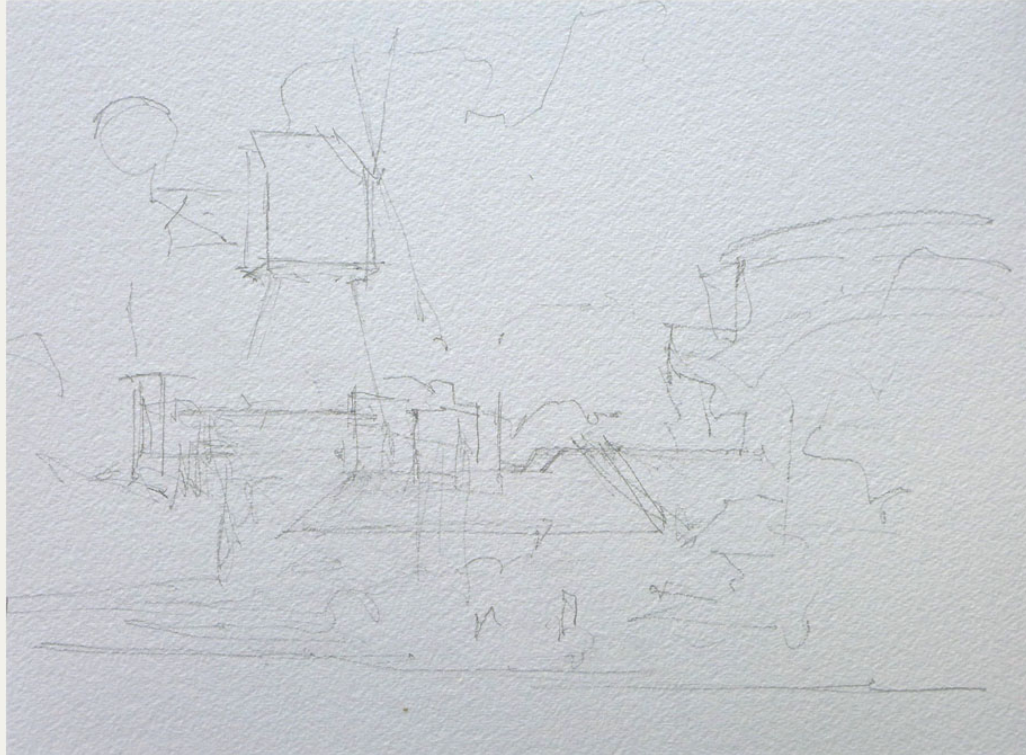
### *Snowfall, path through the woods*

This scene was irresistible. A great deal of it was done using two techniques: wet-in-wet, and 'skipping' the loaded brush over the paper so that the paint just caught the surface here and there. The far right side was actually a complex mass of bushes and brambles, but as I began to render this, it started to snow with lots of tiny ice whiskers – the effect of which can be seen – and I had to quit.

## STEP BY STEP: THE WINDMILL

It was extremely hot summer weather and long weeks without rain had brought drought and a hosepipe ban; everywhere the grass was bleached pale yellow. I decided to paint this local landmark on a curious afternoon – curious because though the sky brought oppressive grey clouds, it remained very hot and there was no indication that these clouds would produce any rain. I was pleased to find this viewing angle of the windmill, a famous local landmark. I have painted this subject several times before, but it's difficult to avoid some awkwardly placed and not very attractive pine trees intruding on the scene. Why I hadn't spotted this particular angle before I am not sure; possibly because to get it, I had to tuck pretty far into a thicket of hedging which, in less dry times, would have resisted more than it did. The clouds were moving over the sky and changing quite fast, but they often created interesting

skies when I arrived. Looking at these patterns, I decided from the outset that I would leave a clearer space in the sky top left, against which the windmill could stand out, which was just as well, for while I was working the sky clouded over to a uniform moderate grey.



**Step 1: pencil drawing**

A fairly careful pencil drawing this time, since I wanted to be sure that the main elements were right, especially the range of roofs, because I would be having to paint the dark background trees around them.



### **Step 2: first wash**

This consisted of two washes, one a dry-grass yellow and the other a grey-violet, mostly to indicate the block of clouds at the right. In a third palette I mixed up a dark green-grey, since I guessed the first washes would start to dry so quickly that I would be able to drop in these dark notes almost immediately without them spreading very much.



### **Step 3: first development**

There seemed a lot to do at this stage, first mixing up a darker version of the original sky grey-violet and strengthening areas of the cloud, then dropping down to indicate the position of the red-brown roofs, and finally putting in some detail drawing of the windmill. In the hot conditions, everything was drying really quickly.



#### **Step 4: second development**

Though this next job was very fiddly, I knew I had to accurately render the diagonal-framed white railing around the middle of the windmill, which took some time and care, as did the detailed structure of the upper windmill. But it was important to do these. Placing something drawn really accurately in a picture allows you to 'lose' other, less important areas – to leave them much looser – which the viewer will not notice by comparison with your fine detail.



#### **Step 5: to finish**

Even more detail now went in to the windmill, indicating the planking of the tower and upper housing, together with lifting out the white vertical rod against the dark trees. Finally, some indication of detail in all the dry grass and vegetation of the foreground, painting some more of the dark shrubbery moderately carefully around the white fencing, and it was done. This essentially English scene subsequently found a very good home in, of all places, Tokyo.

## CHAPTER 6

## THE SKETCHBOOK APPROACH

It is very refreshing sometimes to jettison any idea of producing a ‘completed’ painting outdoors, and instead – or as well as – to go out with a sketch-book. For a very long time I could never settle down to a sketchbook. I never seemed to be able to find a satisfactory combination of both a sketchbook and the equipment that went with it, with the result that I have a shelf full of old sketchbooks, all different sizes and thicknesses and papers, each of which has about three or four pages filled up at the front before being abandoned as unsatisfactory. The problem was not so much the sketchbook as what I took with it. If I was going out for a ‘proper’ painting expedition I would take my usual painting bag, but then I would be using larger papers, not just a sketchbook. If I was really only taking a sketchbook, how much painting equipment did I need? Ideally, I would want to have a proper small paintbox, but that would start to require more clutter, as I would also need at least a couple of brushes, a water pot, bits and pieces, and before I knew it I would be back to half a bagful of stuff again. What I really wanted was a very simple sketching kit that I would genuinely always carry tucked away somewhere in my usual rucksack, along with the shopping, so it would always be handy to grab a quick observation. It would be the minimum possible, the kind of thing you could discreetly deploy on a very small café table next to your cup of coffee.



*Decaying walls, San Pietro*

It was early spring and the trees were mostly still bare branches and twigs. But this allowed me a clear view of some of the everrenewed and ever-decaying rendering so typical of Venetian walls, and made for an interesting study.



*Campo S. Maria Formosa, Venice*

The ideal: a small sketchbook study done indeed on a café table accompanied by a welcome cup of coffee. Note the use of line work – pen simply dipped into watercolour.

First and most important, I needed the ideal sketchbook: not too big, not too small. After a long search, I found what I thought was a neat-looking solution in the form of a not-quite-square book.

This is available from the more specialist art stores – it's just not one of the more common brands or sizes. The page measures about 6in (15cm) square, 96 pages, square-bound, the paper a Fabriano 160gsm, whose surface is not specified but approximates to NOT. Opened out, the double page makes a pleasant format, which I find myself using much more often than the single page. So far so good; what could accompany this?

To begin with, I thought that watercolour pencils would be the ideal answer; two or three of those, and maybe one brush to swab a bit of water over the drawn areas by way of creating a wash. So I went out and bought a selection of such pencils from different ranges to experiment with. As so often, these enjoyable and apparently successful tests done in the comfort of the studio did not work at all well when I came to apply them outdoors.

What I got was basically a monochrome pencil drawing with a bit of smudging, and the 'watercolour' bit of it, hopefully creating wash areas from the drawn work, didn't work anything like as well as I'd imagined. Maybe it was the paper; at any rate, I was rather disappointed with watercolour pencils.



*The minimum sketch kit, closed*

All you need to start out as a 'guerrilla sketcher' – sketchbook, one good brush, one pencil, tiny 'paintbox' – though you will need to raid your own bottle of drinking water too.



*The minimum sketch kit in action*

The book is open at one of the very first sketches I did using this kit, while sitting at a café table. The scribbled note says *St Martins, morning 4 Feb*, and that it took me 35 minutes. Presumably this was a warmer February day than most!

I still hankered after something just a little bit more than the monochrome that a single watercolour pencil could give, just a bit more colour, which meant a paintbox. But the ‘paintbox’ had to be small! Eventually I found a very small plastic jar, once used for make-up, which had a nice screw-top lid. It was the lid I wanted most, for into this I stuck three watercolour pans, which I filled with burnt umber, ultramarine blue and perylene maroon. I picked these three colours as a sort of extension of the brownish/purplish monochrome of the watercolour pencils I had been using, but after using this for a while soon felt the need for some kind of yellow too, so added a fourth pan of yellow ochre. This muted selection proved capable of suggesting a surprising range of colours, thanks mainly to the very forgiving qualities of the Fabriano paper in my sketchbook.

I needed a paintbrush too, and here I struck lucky with an early choice, one of those retractable brushes. The first one I used seemed to carry no maker’s identification whatever, but is about size 10, synthetic hair. So that

formed what I called the minimum painting kit: a sketchbook, the plastic pot whose body doubled as a water-pot and whose lid combined the four paints with a tiny bit of mixing space, the one paintbrush, one drawing pencil, and water from whatever bottle I happened to be carrying anyway. For a while I really did work with this extremely simple kit, but before long I did cheat a bit, because I couldn't resist one of those brilliantly useful collapsible water pots, which mostly I use in its telescoped-up state (see [Chapter 2](#)), and a small plastic dish for colour mixing. But then that was it.

With this minimum kit in my rucksack, I started to have great fun as what you might call a guerrilla sketcher. No more worries about easels or heaps of painting kit, no concerns about obstructing pavements or attracting the attention of large serious gentlemen working for His Majesty or for Security and, most of all, no feeling that I had to finish a painting, nor any commitment to a two-hour painting session – no! I could spot a subject, prop myself against a wall or in a corner, whip out a pencil and draw it in a couple of minutes, and decide whether it was worth carrying on with a bit of colour; if so, out with the minimum painting kit (a bit of a struggle to manage all this with two hands, admittedly, but you can always put things on the ground, or a bit of handy wall, or the top of a litter bin or something). Some watercolour wash, maybe a bit more drawing, pack up and off, all within half an hour or so. Freedom at last!

Many of the sketches in this chapter were done in exactly this way, using the sketchbook and kit I have described. There is something very liberating about running sketches right across the page fold, as I often do, a glad affirmation that you are on the loose, that nothing here has to be framed and exhibited or formalised, but it's just for fun, just for you. Once you have adopted this kind of attitude, you can even free yourself from the sketchbook itself and simply apply the sketchbook approach by maybe taking a little more in the way of equipment and using smaller than usual papers or blocks, which won't have the sketchbook's fold across their middle.

Many of the techniques we saw in [Chapter 4](#) can be used on the smaller scale here. Line and wash works particularly well on the (usually) rather light papers you will be using. The paper that goes into sketchbooks is generally manufactured not from cotton or rag, as in the more expensive papers, but from wood pulp. You will find this gives a brighter, more impactful appearance than with heavier papers – the colour stays more on

the surface. So far so good; why not use this all the time? No reason, really, except that wood pulp paper is not as permanent as cotton or rag paper – it is prone to develop ‘foxing’ (those brown spots you see on old prints and books), but since it may take forty or fifty years to do so, this will probably not bother you very much.



*Victoria Embankment, towards Westminster*

A March day, the colour almost monochromatic, while looking towards strong light from the west. This is a busy street corner leaving no room at all for an easel, even if I had had one with me, nor anywhere to sit, so I simply stood. But there was a sort of concrete plinth nearby to put my few things on.



### *On the slipway, Lymington*

The immediacy and need for rapid handling in small-scale sketching also encourages you to try tackling moving things, such as this busy collection of ducks and gulls.



### *Alfred Place*

Another quick sketch grabbed while sitting at the traditional café table. Though very rapid, it still records a lot of interesting elements – bikes, students talking at a table, one tree in the full light and another in shadow, the sweep of the kerbside, the pattern of shadows – which could easily make this the subject of a full-scale painting.



*King's Parade, Cambridge*

The sketchbook, when opened out to a double page vertically, lends itself very well to architectural subjects like this one. There is a great deal of drawing here, but it is not in pencil; much of this is pen dipped in a mid-grey watercolour mix.



### *Early morning at sea*

I was aboard the clipper *Sea Cloud* and this April morning scene felt earlier than it really was – a grey sky just clearing and a cold grey sea. I wanted to get some kind of sketch of the sky down, however rough, and very quickly swabbed in this colour note in just a few minutes.



*Crewman at work, Sea Cloud*

The same voyage, a couple of days later, and the very next page of the same sketchbook. This crewman was concentrating hard on a rigging job, and I don't think he even knew that I was there.

You can also go on to apply some of the sketchbook's more carefree, loose-edged approach to bigger paintings too with the 'vignetted' look, where you leave yourself lots of white space to play around in. And now that we're thinking about that kind of look – white space, free composition – a word about pencil lines. With all outdoor painting, what you are looking at is an artist's rapid reaction to something seen. You are witnessing the

artist's thought process as the image is transcribed, and personally I consider that the original pencil lines are just a part of that visible process, indeed quite an interesting part. So I don't bother very much about erasing pencil lines unless they intrude really awkwardly into an area I know I'll want to keep clean and pure at the end. If you're going to do this – to erase pencil lines before you start to put down washes – only ever use a putty rubber, preferably a clean and fairly new one at that. Anything else will ruin the surface of the paper. Incidentally, contrary to what is often said, you *can* erase pencil lines to some extent after they are painted over, though you may not succeed in eliminating all trace of them.

Even more than outdoor painting, a sketchbook is your space to explore and your book of memories. It can be so private. Nothing here will ever be framed and exhibited. No one need ever see what you do here, if you don't want them to. No one need ever see your disastrous attempts to try a new style, the figure drawings that went hopelessly wrong, the paintings abandoned after 15 minutes, the strange notes you scribbled to yourself, the bad language. Equally, nothing can quite match the experimental dash and immediacy of a sketchbook; your most interesting work may be found here, probably right alongside your worst. And it doesn't matter, for here you are free.



*Beach on La Blanquilla*

Perhaps the oldest sketch in this book, done when I was carrying little more than a small watercolour paintbox. I was sitting on the beach with my sketchpad propped up against a bag. *Sea Cloud II* had anchored off this island beach, where everyone immediately headed for that single patch of shade.



*The Piazzetta, early morning*

I made two painting trips to Venice in the same year to produce work for an exhibition. I took various options for my painting kit, but this particular morning, walking about, I had with me only a small Canson paper block, 7 × 10in (18 × 25.5cm), a tiny paintbox, one brush and a few watercolour pencils.



*From the Accademia Bridge*

Once again, I was using the small block of Canson paper. Knowing how busy this bridge can become, I arrived very early and had finished by 8.30. I was using one of those all-in-one plastic paintboxes with a clip-on water pot, and was balancing this on top of the bridge railing when the water pot decided to spring off into the Grand Canal. After a few muttered words, I improvised and carried on.



*The pine arboretum*

The small size and rapid handling possible with a sketchbook makes it easier to pin down quickly changing light and shadow effects, as seen here on the tree trunks.



### *The Japanese Gateway*

The line and wash technique used in a sketch. The composition finished up as an off-centre, illustrative sort of look, which seems rather appropriate to the subject, though I had not set out with that in mind.



*Old Boathouse, Teddington*

A very hot and sunny afternoon was great for creating these intriguing strong shadows from the very ornate roofwork, and luckily, I found a patch of shade in which to work. I had fun sweeping in all the intense dark areas. These seemed to make such a strong design that I saw no need to carry on painting out to the edges.



*The Curfew Tower, Windsor Castle*

A scene of great complexity, straying pretty far from the simple notion of a sketchbook page, but included here to illustrate the principle of using white space as a relief to counterbalance such a mass of detail.



*The gondola boatyard, San Trovaso*

This is famous as one of the few remaining boatyards building and maintaining gondolas – Canaletto painted this very yard. This view is from the Fondamente Nani, on the other side of the canal, where I could perch and lay out my kit on a low wall, which offered a fine opportunity to drop things into the water below.



*Bosham, evening light*

One of those sketchbook pages which evokes atmosphere and could easily become the subject of a larger studio painting. This was the middle one of three sketches I did on the same afternoon.



*Rushmere Pond, Wimbledon*

Again, the rapidity of sketchbook work – and the liberating feeling that it really doesn't matter if it goes wrong – encourages you to tackle subjects like this: fleeting clouds scudding across the sky, and the near-certainty that it will rain very shortly. Notice the upper left of the sky, where the wash has settled into a 'cauliflower' – not only does this not matter in a sketch, but it actually looks like just another cloud.



*East Head, Chichester Harbour*

This was not a painting expedition at all – it was a seaside walk with a rucksack full of picnic – but the sketchbook and a tiny paintbox took up no space at all. Even with so little, I could still have fun playing about with technique, using the back end of a paintbrush to scratch highlights in the dune grass, and a pencil dipped in the wet watercolour to draw the corresponding dark grasses.



*False Banana, the Temperate House*

A very particular personal memory, since the day after I did this Kew Gardens was closed down because of coronavirus, and three days after that the whole country went into lockdown. It was four months before we could get out again, and even then with many restrictions. The False Banana may have wondered where everyone had gone.



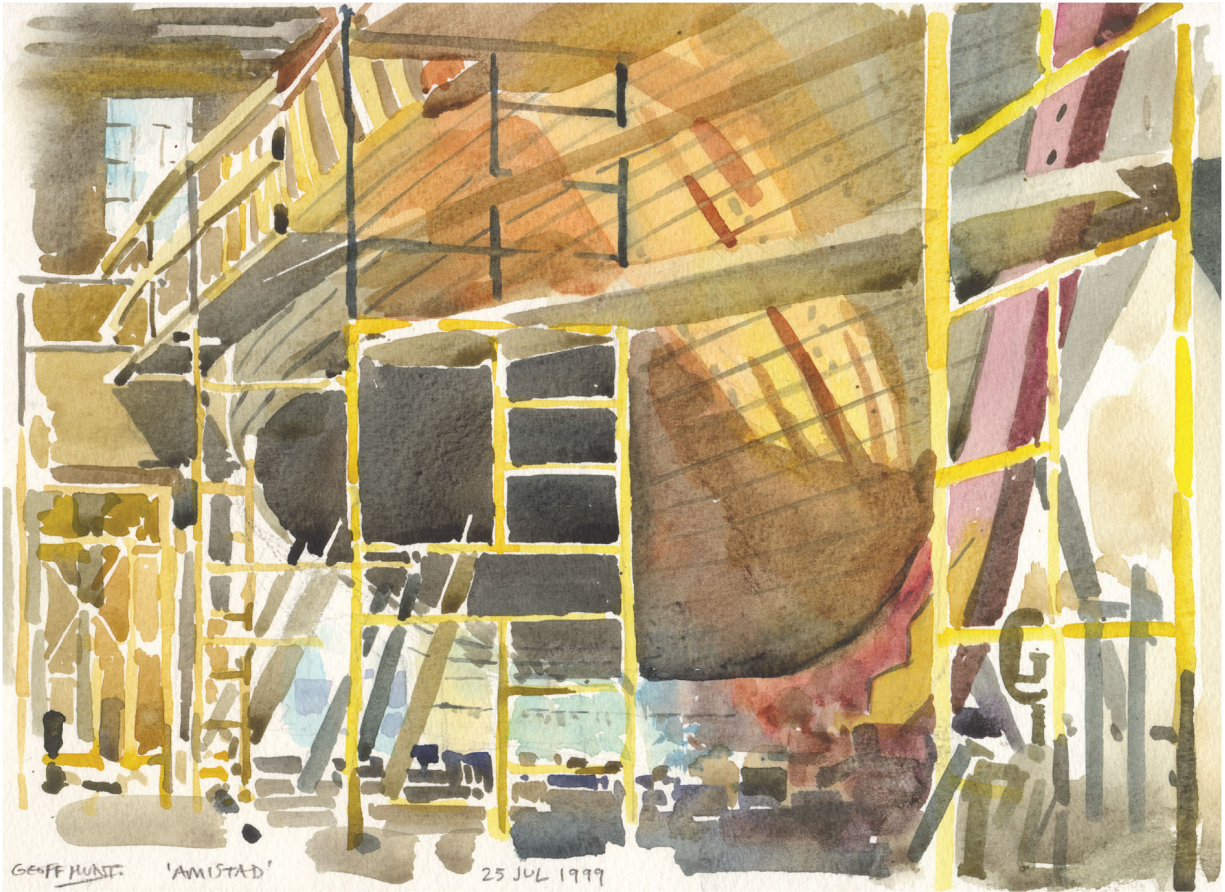
### *Pigtail Steps*

*Sea Cloud* was moored right opposite the famous 'Pigtail Steps' in Port Mahon, Minorca (they are so-called because this is where old-time sailors, who used to sport pigtails, came ashore to the taverns or fell down on the way back). The paper I used was the equivalent of hot pressed, a harder surface where the colour just sits on top.



*Marine miscellany, Maldon*

Once more, though this was a 'proper' painting, the subject was so intricate that it seemed to call for the sketchbook approach. In this case, quite a lot of the drawing was carried out using pen dipped into watercolour.



### *Amistad*

An earlier sketch made at Mystic Seaport inside the boatyard's main building shed. I was lucky enough to be there just as they were finishing planking up their superb replica of the notorious schooner *Amistad*, which has subsequently been used as the focus of an educational programme teaching about the slave trade.



*Old Marine Engine, Mystic*

Shipyards are often cluttered with mysterious and fascinating subjects. This fine hunk of machinery stands in Mystic shipyard close by the building shed where *Amistad* was constructed.

## STEP BY STEP: BOATSHED INTERIOR

Traditional boatyards are always an attractive subject. I began this section with a couple of variations on the theme, which were done as sketchbook studies on my travels. To stay with the theme, the chapter finishes with this step-by-step study of an interior, though this one is a lot closer to home. Boatyard interiors are full of just as much glorious junk as the yards outside, or even more, and this one was a prime example. In such a situation the main challenge, unless you want to be working on a painting for days, is to find ways of simplifying the extreme complexity of what you can see. In this case, I decided from the outset that what most interested me was the soft glow of white daylight from the right, and the intriguing ladder going up to who knows where, and I would have to let go of quite a lot of the rest. But I also decided immediately against including the rolled-up blue tarpaulin on the floor; in my experience, it is practically impossible to make blue plastic sheets look like anything comprehensible in a painting. The machine cover on the right, however, I thought

could just about be made to work. The location, incidentally, arranged via the Wapping Group, is by very kind courtesy of the Thomas and Stanley Boatyard, Romney Lock.



One of several photographs I took to settle on my final viewpoint. As the photograph suggests, the interior was fairly dark. Note that blue plastic tarpaulin right in the middle of things.



### **Step 1: pencil drawing and wash-in**

I have omitted showing the pencil drawing stage as it was very roughly drawn and most of what drawing there was is reasonably visible here anyway in the wash-in stage. I did not bother overmuch with preliminary drawing, because much of the picture would be in low to dark tones, so I was confident of drawing with the brush in later layers – I could keep on working dark over dark, in other words. The wash-in itself consisted of splodges – I think that is the technical term – of browns and blues, roughly placing key areas.



### **Step 2: first development**

One of the nice things about working in 'outdoor' interiors, such as this, is that the humidity seems a lot more even than it is outside, so your washes and paint layers tend to dry at a steady and predictable rate. This step was a more or less a continuation of the wash-in as I continued to place darker areas, being careful to leave the window's light-source as untouched as possible. Note how the initial dark wash has left two awkward drying marks at the middle top centre. In a sky, say, these would have been a minor catastrophe. Here, they will barely register.



### **Step 3: second development**

Now the real work began as I started to draw and render detail in earnest, especially within the focus of my interest to the right of centre. The staircase had to be accurately drawn because then other areas could be left unresolved, as the viewer would tend to look at the staircase. I outlined this with a pen dipped in a puddle of wash, then reinforced it with fine brushwork. The intense dark beyond the stack of planks left of centre was punched in, as dark as I could go. Note the handle of the bucket at right: this was lifted out of the background (see [Chapter 4](#)).



### **Step 3: third development**

This painting required much further development of the drawing, carrying on just as in the last step, but now providing some indication of detail in the far wall, the overhead racking, and more resolution of the stack of planks. I did not attempt to replicate the exact appearance of this stack (see the photograph) but simply took elements that I liked.



#### **Step 4, to finish**

Very few more changes were made to the previous stage before I called a halt – a little detailing, some darkening here and there – but I include this since it was photographed the following day in my studio and gives some idea of how the same painting can look under different lights. There is a lot of natural light in my studio, but at the boatyard I was working in a fairly dark corner. The same thing would look different again in, say, an art gallery under artificial light.

## CHAPTER 7

# WORKING FAST, AND WHEN TO FINISH

Generally, an outdoor painting needs to be done within something like a two-hour span at most, and this is true for any medium. It may be the weather that changes in this time, but much more important is that the light will change and you'll find it coming from a different direction. In fact, it isn't the change in the *light* that you'll be aware of so much as the change in the *shadows*. So often it is the momentary pattern made by shadows that first strikes you as providing an interesting composition, and it is their rapid alteration that will destroy your composition, your inspiration and your good humour. Somehow, we all fall for this every time. Also, it is far better that your painting board should not be in direct sunlight. As with scouting out what makes a suitable location, you will acquire the sense to judge where the sun will be in an hour or so; if it works round to shine straight on your board halfway through painting, you will find it so difficult to see that you will probably have to abandon the piece. But you can also work your judgement of the sun's future position positively in your favour, such as when you can anticipate where you might be well placed, later on, to see an interesting late afternoon or sunset sky in front of you. In this situation, you may be able to do much of the painting 'backwards' – deciding on your composition, drawing it up, then painting in most of the foreground dark or mid tones, the land or buildings or whatever, before finally adding the sky in at the end.



*Trinity College Gatehouse, Cambridge*

I spent quite a long time on this sketch, but I knew I should have spent even longer, when I could have drawn and defined the mass of sculpted and inscribed detail over the archway. I promised myself that I would finish it in the studio, though this promise I have never kept.



*Autumn sunset, The Crooked Billet*

What really interested me here was that sliver of late sunlight sliding up the slope and spotlighting the pub, and it was essential to work really fast to block in the main areas around it, leaving descriptive details like the chimney pots, lamps and whatnot until the end – by which time, of course, that ribbon of light was long gone.



### *Stonington sunset*

The beach at Stonington is nothing at all special – no café, no bar, just a little place for locals. I arrived only about an hour before sunset to see a wonderful rosy light with long mauve shadows (the sand is very white there), which I did my best to register very quickly indeed on a smallish 9 × 12in (23 × 30.5cm) sketchpad.



*Seafood shack, Shaffer's Marina*

I had arrived in Mystic one Monday evening for their annual plein-air painting week, following which I had to paint five decent paintings in two or three days, have them framed and up on the wall for an exhibition on the Saturday. So no pressure, then. Knowing the area as I did, I was able to go immediately to this spot very early in the morning, catching those lovely shadows, and was finished before 9am.

You are almost always working fast outdoors. But sometimes you have to work extra fast, generally in situations such as the following:

1. Very transient conditions – some particular shadow or sliver of light, or an interesting sky. In this case, you might choose simply to paint a sketch for later reference.
2. Trying to register moving subjects, as with figures or animals; or, as in the admittedly unusual example on page 111, you may yourself be moving.
3. Other circumstances are forced upon you – the tide may be coming up; or you may see a distant rain squall coming your way (in which case you'll have between twenty and thirty minutes); if in town, maybe

Security will tell you that you can only have another half-hour before you will have to move on. Or you might be hurrying before the completely inevitable truck arrives to block the fine view you've found.

4. There may be problems with your paper or materials that militate against completion on site – usually, because the paper's too damp.
5. And don't forget those more personal, pragmatic reasons. You might not have left yourself enough time before, say, you have to catch a train; or you might reckon you have only so long before you'll want to find a toilet (especially when the weather is cold).





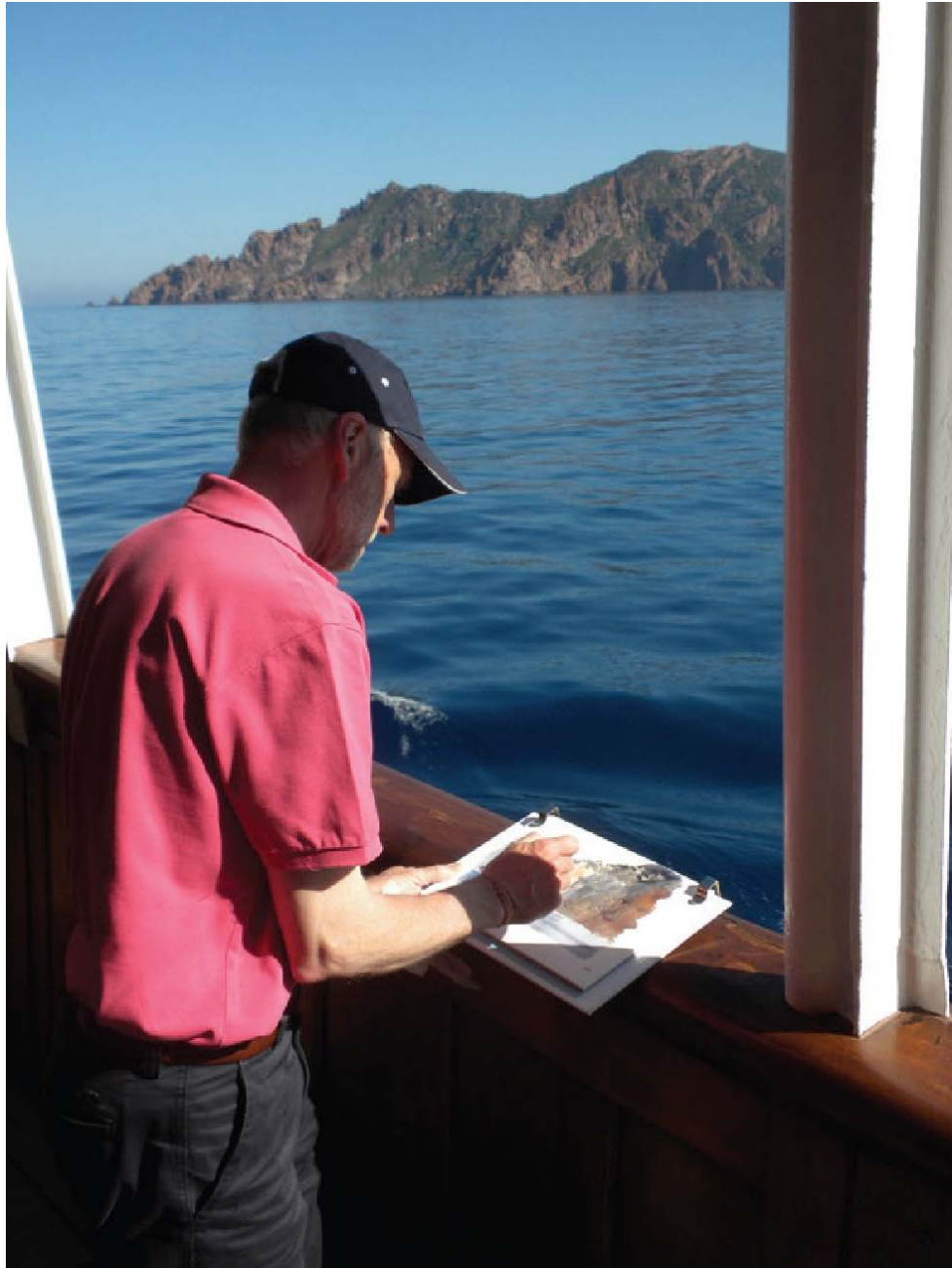
*Norwegian visitors, Mystic Harbor*

The tide at Mystic did not arrive fast nor high, but it did get to me eventually and it was time to pack up. Note the improvised work 'table'; a boatyard is a very good place to find useful abandoned oddments, such as this chair.



*Off Golfe de Porto, Corsica*

Another one of those 'stunts', just for fun – painting not just aboard ship, but painting the passing coast while the ship was under way, albeit slowly, so that we could all admire the view. It was not possible to do any more than convey a quick general impression of the coast and its colours.



*Painting off Golfe de Porto (photo courtesy of a shipmate aboard Sea Cloud, I am not sure who) Proof positive that I really did this!*



*On the foc's'le, Sea Cloud*

Usually, it is impossible to paint aboard a sailing ship, but here is a rare exception. There was a ghost of wind, just enough to keep shape in the sails, but it was otherwise calm, and since there was an interesting talk in progress back aft, they just let the ship sail herself. Over an hour or so she lazily described a complete circle. This played havoc with the light and shade I was trying to record, but it was a great afternoon.

Even without these extra time pressures, usually you have something like a couple of hours to work and you have to get used to that time frame. Some painters cope with this by working very quickly so they can handle quite large pieces of work. Most manage by using smaller canvases or papers than they might in the studio. Still others will aim to get most of the image done on site, leaving final consideration and finishing off to the studio. A few will tackle more ambitious pieces, as Monet did, by taking the same painting back to the site at exactly the same time on the next day, or at any rate on the next day when the weather happened to be the same. Wonders of work outdoors can be done in this way if you are in a country with reliable

steady spells of the same weather – I think of Antonio López García’s amazing onsite paintings of Madrid, for example. Even in this country, such masters as Pete (The Street) Brown, taking much more of a chance with the weather, sometimes work in this way. But these are exceptional works by exceptional artists, and most of us do what we can with a two-hour span, or less, on a single day.



*HMS Glasgow building at Govan*

This is quite a finished study which I worked on for some time, but all the while I felt pressured by the need for haste, partly because I was there as the guest of the shipbuilders, BAE Naval Ships Division, and was following their time constraints, and partly because of the darkening sky (and when this dark cloud finally did unload, it flooded the motorway).



*Buckingham Palace after the rain*

This painting was begun under a threatening sky. After I had drawn it up and put down the first washes – which included the clouding sky, at right – I suddenly realised that I had better pack up, quick; which I just managed to do before heavy rain poured down for hours. But I was reluctant to abandon this painting, so next morning I returned with it and finished work.

## HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN IT'S FINISHED?

Working outdoors provides the fine discipline of knowing when to stop because you just don't have the time to go on endlessly fiddling, overworking and ruining perfectly good work. This may mean, as I discovered the hard way, that you have to adjust your expectations of what I would call 'finish'. Representational painting has a spectrum of finish whose extremes are, at one end, photorealism and at the other – what to call it? – looseness? sketchiness? Every artist knows where they are comfortable on that spectrum, where their balance point lies; for you, every other artist's

work is either too tight or too loose. And for you as an artist to be happy, each piece you paint has to reach exactly that point: not too tight, not too loose, just right. How long does it take to get a painting to that point? For some artists and some styles, less than an hour; for others, a week might not be enough. If you are in the latter category, and you still want to paint outdoors, you may have to think again about what standard of finish you'll accept from yourself, or else simply do sketchbook work for later studio pieces.

I always find it instructive to look at step-by-step progressions done by other artists, and almost invariably I will conclude by thinking: Well, that was interesting, but why on earth did they overwork it by going on to step 5? Why didn't they stop at step 4, or even 3, when it is crystal clear that by then they had expressed all there was to say? Why couldn't they see that? Take a look at my own step-by-step paintings in this book and you may very well think the same things about mine – I promise I won't mind. But also bear this in mind as a very useful exercise you can easily do for yourself: embark upon a painting, have your camera or phone handy, and take a snap of your progress every twenty or thirty minutes. Reviewing these successive images afterwards, you will be surprised how much you can learn about your own 'when to stop' point. You may also realise that you are not necessarily your own best judge outdoors on the day. Even if you think it's been a bad day, take the painting home and look at it again next day. You will see it with fresh eyes. In particular, back indoors you will see what you could not see outdoors: that somehow, in spite of what you thought yesterday, you have indeed succeeded in bringing indoors some of the strength and brightness of the great outdoors.



*Greenwich sunset*

This is the full image of the painting of which details appear in [Chapter 4](#). It had been a rainy and miserably grey afternoon, but I kept hanging on in the hope that it might just clear before sunset. I was already waiting in the queue for the waterbus when the sky did exactly that, so I very quickly set up to paint again and had about fortyfive minutes to do this.



*Winter profile, Windsor*

I liked the idea of the dark profile of the trees against the slightly lighter one of the castle. It was the darkening end of a grey afternoon, and I was hoping that there might be that final gleam of sunset, but this time it just did not happen.



### *Skyline, Nice*

Another skyline done in a great hurry, but a different country and climate. I was waiting in the sunshine for the Nice airport bus, and had a little time to spare in which I was able to jot down this brief sketch. The paper was a very hard surface which seemed to suit the brilliant light.

## **CROPPING**

Often one of the most valuable parts of painting outdoors, especially when you think you have failed on the day, is actually the following morning in the studio. Here you can consider the previous day's work, and think, as above, that maybe it doesn't look too bad after all. But now you can try framing and cropping the painting. You should make a considerable number of card masks or frames of different sizes and formats so that you can readily try out different framings. This can make an amazing difference. Very often you will find that cropping down your painting removes extraneous parts of the scene – which, of course, you painted simply because it was there, in front of you – and reveals the core of what had perhaps unconsciously drawn you to that subject to begin with.



*The Clive statue*

There was a lot to look at here – the pattern of shadows, the statue, the detail in the architecture, the steps and the lamps, the brilliant sunlight on the handsome buildings receding in perspective – and I fell straight into the trap of trying to paint it all.



*The Clive statue, cropped*

Back in the studio the following morning, I tried out a number of masks to resize the image before arriving at this one. Though still far from ideal, it does focus better on fewer things of interest – the pattern of shadows, the intriguing archway and pediment at the left, and the statue itself.

## COMPLETING IN THE STUDIO

A chapter about working fast may seem an odd place to suddenly start talking about finishing work in the studio, especially since all the rest of this book is about completing work outdoors anyway; but I wanted to say something about this aspect of painting and it follows on from all I have been saying about working fast simply because you may actually run out of time outdoors – for one of the reasons I mentioned above – before you have said all you wanted to say. Sometimes a brush stroke here and there will make a critical difference – not that I advocate reworking outdoor pieces in the studio, mind – but occasionally a subject which you observed fleetingly, usually in some passing lighting condition, will make such an impact that you will feel it deserves the full studio treatment. You will always have the time, maybe just a minute or two, to make a sketch or note on some scrap of paper, and you should use this, together with your strong memory of the scene, as the main foundation of the studio piece. Of course, you will almost certainly take photos as well, on your phone or whatever, but photographic images are a terribly contagious source of information, and you must try not to be infected by them. Before you know where you are, you will finish up trying to copy the photograph, a path to infinite misery.



*Greenwich, the Cutty Sark plaza*

Virtually all of this was done on site, but I miscalculated the time and had to cut and run in order to get to a meeting. But I liked the painting, so worked on it just a little more in the studio the following morning, mainly to add the lettering on the pub wall and the two figures at the left. Had I not run out of time, I would have done these same things on site.



*Autumn colours, Cannizaro Park*

This spot in a local park seemed about right to paint autumn colour – the grass underfoot was soaking with dew, but no matter, the sun was out, so I began work. But the paper remained sopping wet throughout, due to the saturated atmosphere over all that wet grass, so I had no choice but to take it home to dry, finishing it in the studio by crisping up the edges, details and darkest notes.



*North side, Trafalgar Square*

This was a small sketch, 9 × 12in (23 × 30.5cm), on a block of Arches Rough paper, but was a wildly overambitious subject for such a small compass, even if I had not been forced to abandon it in order to find a public convenience (it being a cold November day).



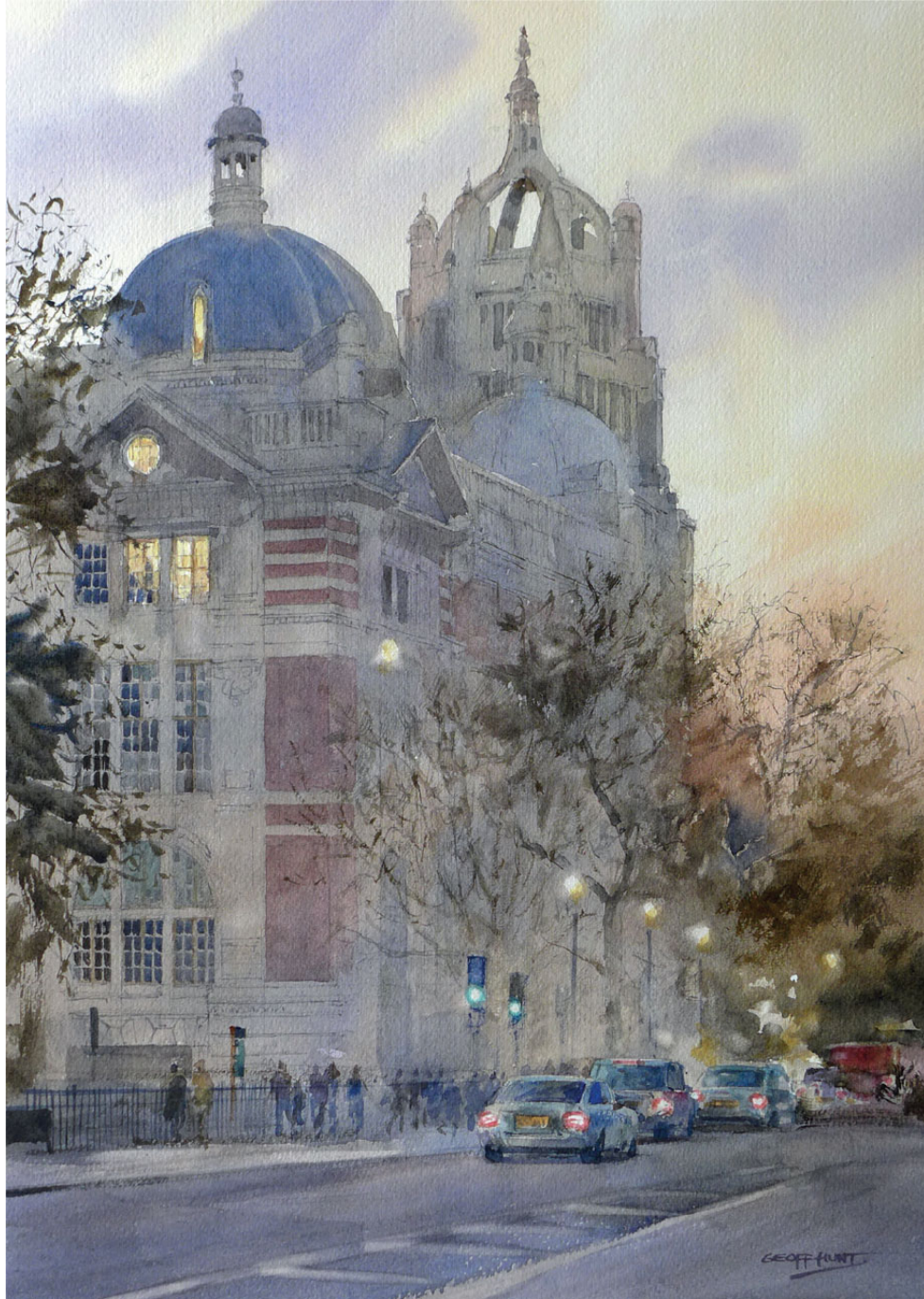
*Distant view of Pall Mall from St Martin-in-the-Fields*

Although I had abandoned the sketch, I was so taken with the view that I decided to paint it as a studio work, resulting in this painting, considerably larger at almost 13 × 17in (33 × 43cm). I tried to retain the spirit of the sketch but, as so often, was influenced a little too much by the reference photographs I had taken.



*Victoria and Albert Museum, sketchbook*

A classic case for always carrying a sketchbook and being ready for opportunity. I was struck by this scene, the towers of the V&A looming dark against a luminous December late afternoon sky. Having my minimum painting kit handy (see [Chapter 6](#)), I stood against a railing where I could prop the sketchbook and, while holding everything, painted this little study in thirty minutes.



*Victoria and Albert Museum, December dusk*

I had considered from the start that this subject was worthy of much grander treatment and that the sketch provided the foundation for a studio work. This was the eventual result, an 18 × 13in (45.5 × 33cm) piece, where I attempted to capture the essential dusk atmosphere of the scene while working up the detail of the buildings and the street scene.

## STEP - BY - STEP: LOW TIDE, HEYBRIDGE

A deceptively simple subject to end with – a pleasant day by the sea, apparently very little in sight to look at, and no real problems apart from having to contend with an occasionally gusty wind (you can see the photo of the scene and my own location in [Chapter 2](#)). But the reason why this belongs to the category of 'working fast' was the very 'nothingness' of what was in view – I was interested in trying to capture the glittering light on the mud and the shining braids of water winding into the distance, all of which were changing extremely rapidly as the tide came in, and indeed would soon disappear altogether underwater. The special challenge with watercolour in this kind of subject lies in doing all you can to retain your brightest lights in the form of the pure white paper. It is a far easier proposition in oils, where it is so simple, getting towards the end of such a painting, especially if you are working on a toned board, to triumphantly plaster in some crusty brilliant white to represent the glittering water, and scatter a few well-placed highlights about.



### **Step 1: pencil drawing (not shown)**

As the situation called for quick action, I set up everything as fast as I could and in a minute or so drew the barest minimum of pencil lines for guidance. The only one I was at all careful about was the placing of the horizon line, to ensure it was level, for which I used my bit of straight-edge.

### **Step 2: wash-in**

I mixed up two palettes of wash, one a medium dark cobalt blue touched with violet, the other a greyed mid-sand. Then, wetting with clear water the sky area and an arc from the centre towards the lower left, I struck in with these washes (after half a minute, in all the rush, at this stage I generally forget which brush is loaded with which colour, but it never seems to matter a great deal). However, I always try to reserve one wash brush for nothing but clear water.



### **Step 3: first development**

At some intermediate point, just as the wash-in was finishing drying, I indicated the position of the distant barge. As the drying finished, I could carry on with observing and rendering all the detail in the mudbanks and rivulets. The rivulet in the lower left foreground was lifted out of the background colour.



#### **Step 4: second development**

With the sky area now dry – and for once, drying conditions were good, despite working beside the water – after mixing a dark green-grey wash I could render the distant trees and far landscape, dipping in and out of other colours as I went across. There was some more darkening to be done in the right foreground to point up the contrast with the bright areas.



#### **Step 5: to finish**

Very little more remained to be done, apart from accurately marking in the masts, spars and a few deck details of the Thames barge. The whole piece had been essentially an exercise in restraint, in *not* painting rather than in painting – to avoid, at all costs, losing the bright highlights of the white paper left of centre.

## **AND FINALLY**

I would like to promise that the more you paint outdoors, the better you will get at it, but I'm not at all sure you will feel that. In the Wapping Group, which goes out painting every week from April to September, and where some of us have been doing so for twenty or thirty years, a grumble very frequently heard is that we never seem to have got anywhere – never progressed. I have known a very celebrated painter of fifty years' standing say that. But that is artists' nonsense. Of course we have. Once you start painting seriously, try comparing some work you have just done with what you did two or three years ago – or, better, ask a friend or a fellow artist their opinion (honestly, now!). It isn't that your work has not improved, but as you have gained experience and awareness, if you are any good at all, it is your critical faculty which has sharpened and become so much less easy

to please. Your standards have risen. As I suggested earlier, that's what keeps us going – why every fresh day brings a new opportunity to excel, to meet our own never-satisfied standards. And look what else you have done! You have been out in the fresh air, taking exercise, going to places you might not have visited otherwise, seeing all sorts of things, maybe making new friends, experiencing some wonderful effects of light and weather, collecting stories to tell. You'll have a stack of paintings and sketchbooks and notes. You may have joined a group and taken part in exhibitions. When winter comes, you'll be looking over the year's work and you'll be busy planning next year's campaign. As a very venerable colleague of mine, a rather dour individual not much given to expressions of enthusiasm about anything, once very greatly surprised me by saying, with a cheerful grin: 'Painting outdoors – I *love* it!'



*Street corner, St Tropez*

St Tropez is difficult to paint in because the streets are so narrow and congested. I had looked about for a long time before I found a clear spot from which to paint. This was on the edge of a traffic island with just one gap left between the vehicles, which otherwise lined every kerb, so I hurried to paint this before the inevitable Porsche or something similar arrived to claim the space.

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to my friends and fellow artists in the Wapping Group of Artists, who first encouraged me to venture out of the studio, and without whom it would not exist.